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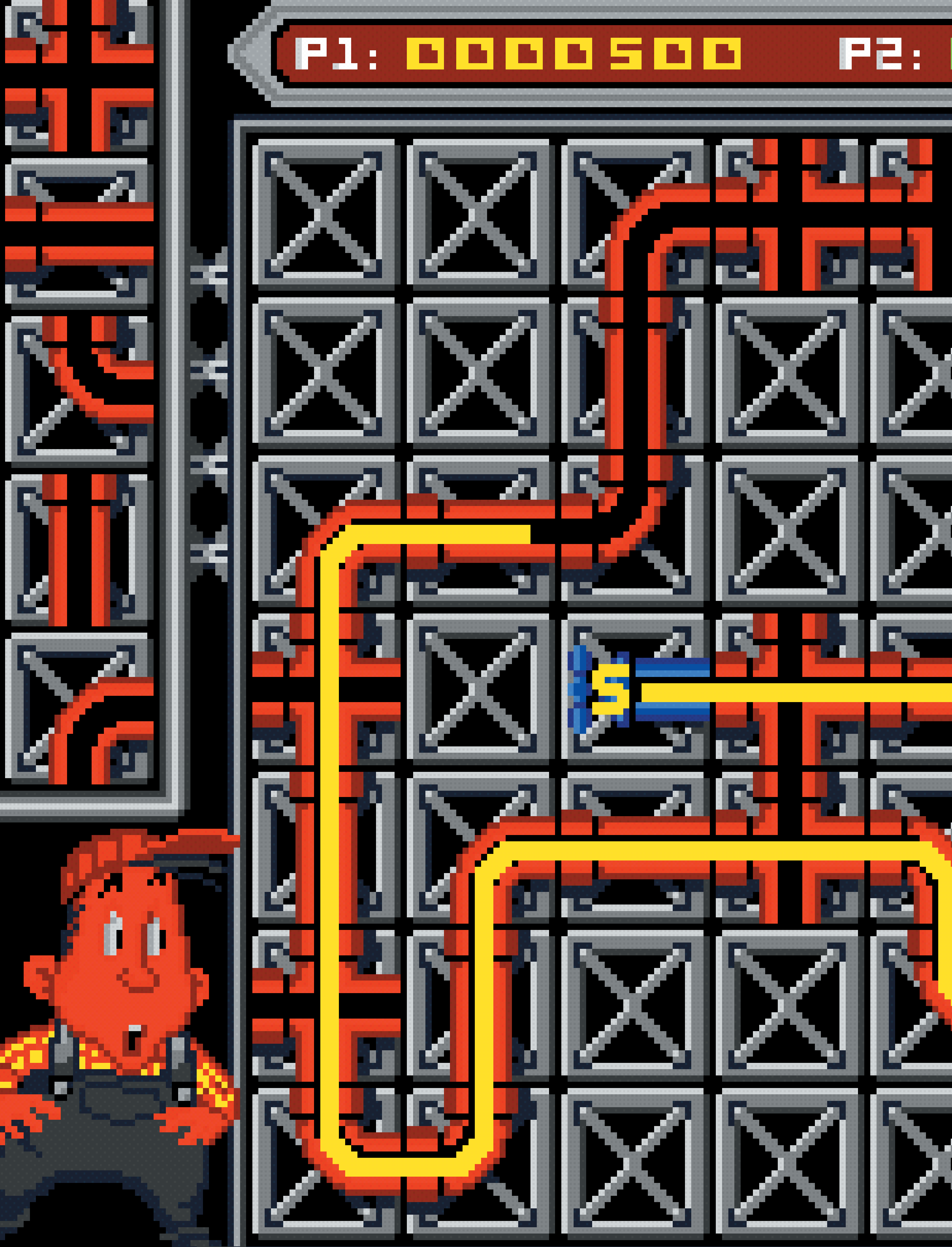

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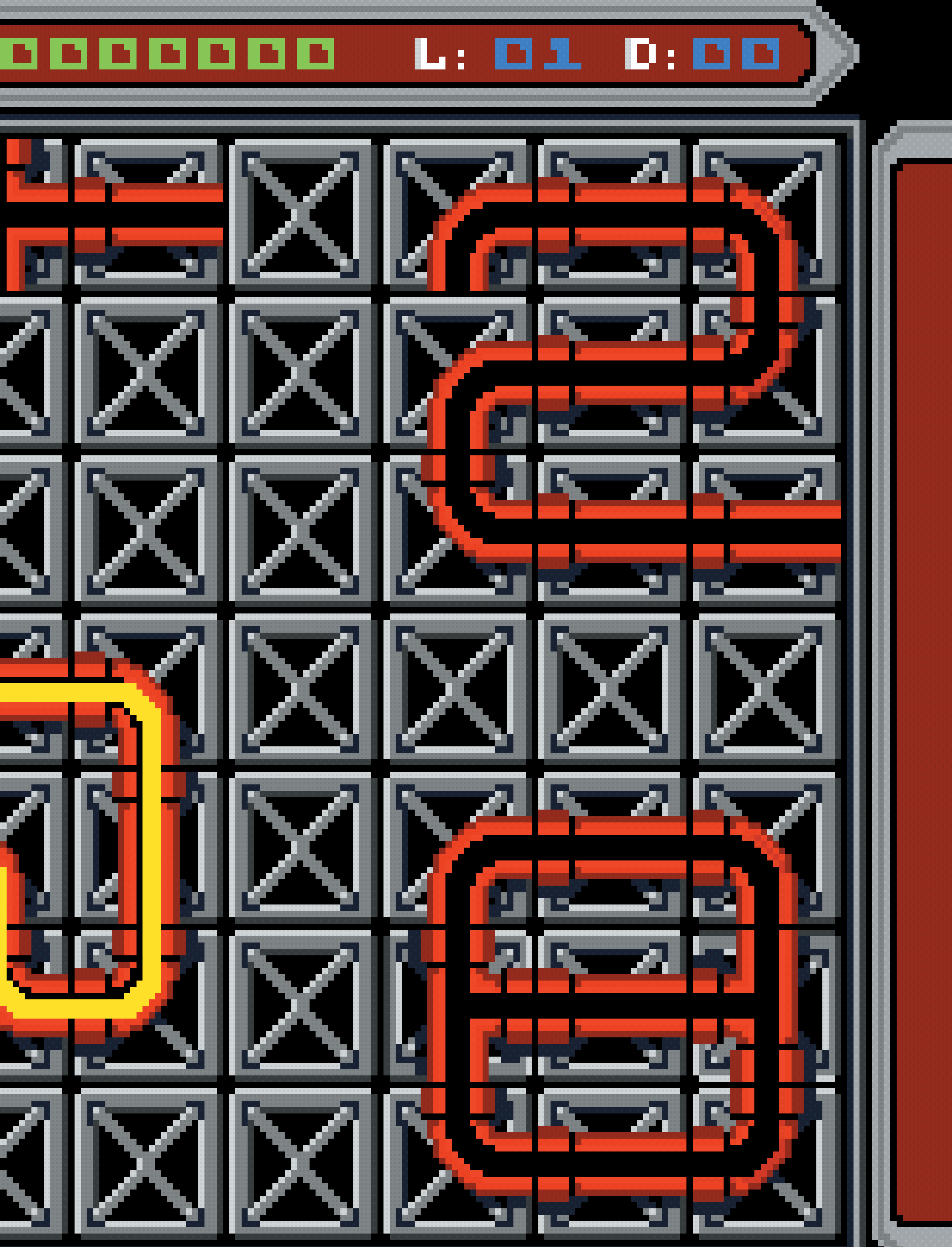
With the festivities now over, a period of reflection and anticipation has set in. On the one hand, we still have a glut of quality games that were released at the end of last year but remain wrapped in cellophane and, perhaps rather unfortunately, many are likely to stay that way. On the other, the DS and the PSP have entered our lives. One has given us the opportunity to send crude images to each other (all in the name of testing the capabilities of the device, you understand), the other looks frighteningly like the must-have gadget of 2005.

Although the prospect of Nintendo and Sony slugging it out in a head-to-head handheld scrap is certainly tantalising, it is but one element of what is already shaping up to be a fascinating year for videogaming. With all three hardware developers set to unveil their next-gen hardware this year, and one strongly rumoured to be actually launching its new console, there's an awful lot at stake for the big three. And that's just the hardware…

Simon Phillips,
Group Editor




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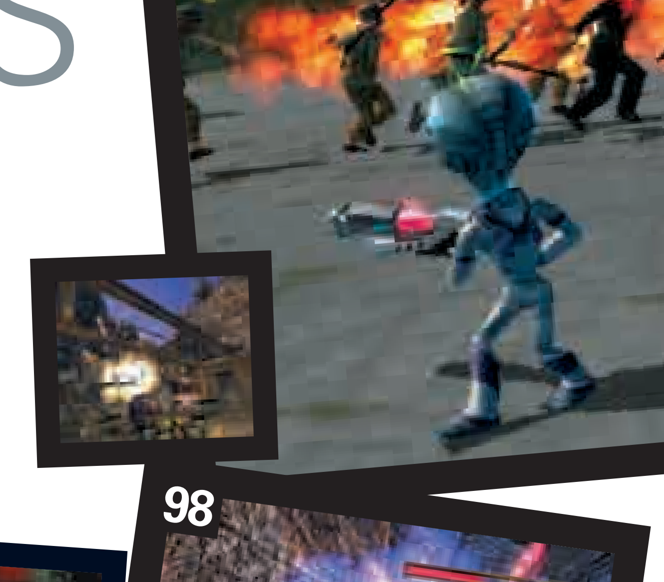

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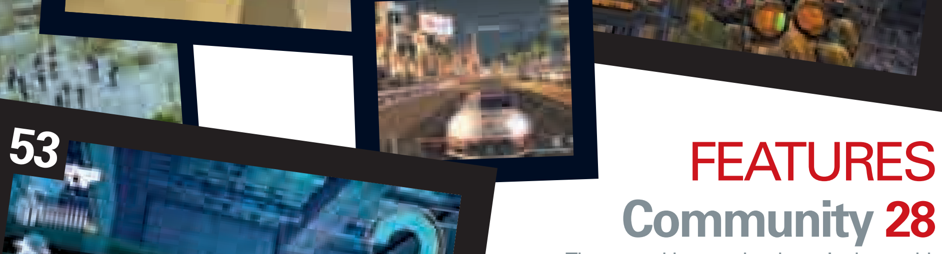
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REVIEWS

RETRO





FEATURES

Community 28

The second-largest developer in the world, based in one of the coldest cities we've ever visited – you've got to love the Ubisoft spirit, especially since its Montreal studio is responsible for some truly great games.

Credits To The Nation 72

Too much spare change in your pockets? Well, never fear – the arcade industry is alive and well and ready to take it all. We speak to the people behind a revived market.

Precious Metal 140

Mention *Metal Gear* and we're willing to bet that a lot of people believe the series began with the PSone game – but they're wrong. Retro takes an extensive look back through the series' history to see where it all began.



REGULARS

NEWS

NEWS | **INDUSTRY GOSSIP** | OPINION

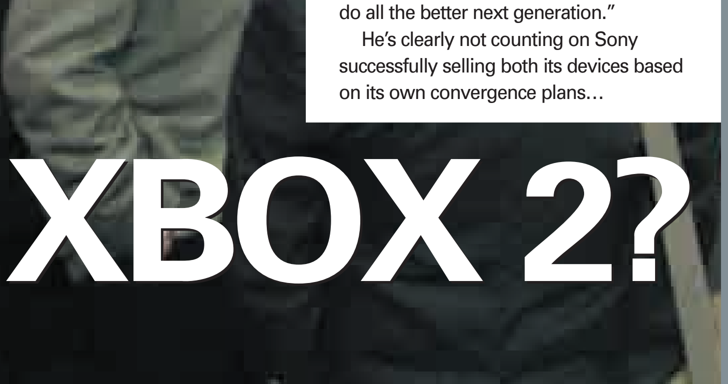
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FIND OUT WHERE TO GET THE ESSENTIAL STORIES WITH OUR QUICK GUIDE TO THE NEWS



LACK OF HARDWARE ANNOUNCEMENT LEAVES PUNDITS DISAPPOINTED

WOT NO



XBOX 2?

This month's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) was hotly tipped to see the unveiling of Microsoft's Xbox 2. But Bill Gates remained tight-lipped when it came to the next-generation console, leaving the industry disappointed.

Rather than reveal hardware specs or firm details about the Xbox follow-up, Gates preferred to concentrate on media convergence plans revolving around Microsoft's Media Center PC software.

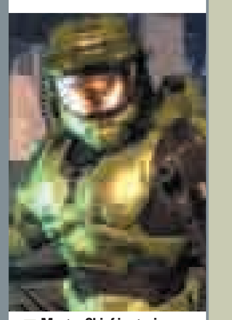
However, despite the lack of an Xbox 2 presentation, an interview conducted by CNET News.com at CES saw Gates elaborate on the part the console will play in his convergence scheme. The idea is that Xbox 2 will work alongside Media Center PC. "Media Centre PC and Xbox [will] become totally complementary," Gates said, explaining how the Xbox 2 will be more than just a games console, but an entire media device. "You've seen a bit of [this] where we let you take music from PCs and put it into games, and we have this extender concept where the Media Center can project through the Xbox… That's just the start of what we can do."

Gates was also eager to champion plans to merge Xbox Live with the MSN instant messenger service and to work with content providers such as MTV and the Discovery Channel to give added value to the next-generation console. "For the games alone [people will] go 'wow'," Gates enthused, "but the concept of bringing in media, connecting to the PC and connecting Xbox Live to Messenger – it's a very big deal."

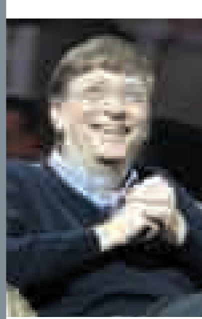
Also covered in the interview was the topic of handheld gaming, with Gates revealing he has no intention of breaking into this market, preferring to focus efforts on "getting [games] onto phones [and] portable PCs," while at the same time watching the "intense competition [between] Sony and Nintendo." While on the subject of handheld gaming, Gates optimistically remarked: "The fact Sony's a little distracted with [the PSP] may let us do all the better next generation."

He's clearly not counting on Sony successfully selling both its devices based on its own convergence plans…

We're still waiting on a western PSP launch date.



Master Chief is staying on the Xbox – it's official.



Bill Gates wants to see more media convergence.

FEAR & LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS

OTHER DISAPPOINTMENTS FROM CES

PSP LAUNCH DETAILS?

Also expected at CES was an official word on the US release of Sony's PSP handheld, but we're still not any wiser about when the machine may arrive. Kaz Hirai, CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America, merely said the PSP would "most likely" be released in North America sometime in March – a date many had already assumed and as such this was of little interest to those wanting something a bit more concrete. A price point was also notably absent, as was bundle information and exact launch game line-up details. And as for UK launch information… not a chance. In fact, the presentation merely consisted of regurgitated hype as Hirai proceeded to evangelise to his audience that, "PSP will elevate portable entertainment out of the handheld gaming ghetto, and Sony is the only company that can do it… PSP will be a disrupter in the portable entertainment space." The waiting continues.

HANDHELD LOSES ITS HALO

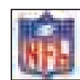
Resurfacing at CES were rumours regarding the appearance of *Halo* on Tiger Telematics' new Gizmondo handheld system. However, developer Bungie has scotched these rumours with an announcement on its website denying any deal has been struck. "Microsoft does have a relationship with the handheld maker," explained the website, "[but] the arrangement does not include *Halo*." Still, despite no *Halo* for the console, the Gizmondo did have a fairly positive showing at CES with a handful of original titles being announced for the system; these included a Sega Classics pack and the original IPs announced by Warthog before it was acquired by Gizmondo Europe. Despite this, Gizmondo is still keen to play on vague Xbox ties, with a demo at the Microsoft stand at CES describing the Windows-powered Gizmondo as an "Xbox in your pocket".

OUR TWO CENTS

Despite the lack of concrete Xbox 2 and US/UK PSP launch details at CES it wasn't a washout, with Bill Gates sharing some nice specifics on the direction of Xbox 2. Based on what was said, Microsoft seems to be heading in the right direction – concentrating primarily on games, but giving users an officially licensed and radically improved version of the type of home media centre currently enjoyed by those owners who dare to place modchips on their Xboxes. As for the lack of PSP launch details for the US and UK, this is more worrying than it is disappointing, as it reinforces fears that Sony won't be able to release the machine in time for the expected March street date. The low stock levels of the PSP in Japan do nothing to change this assumption. As for the Gizmondo, it's unsurprising it seems to be riding on the Xbox's coat-tails to gain attention, though dismissals from Bungie are doing nothing to aid the flagging handheld's cause, which despite being out in the UK already is yet to be found in most stores.



BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



EA SCORES A TOUCHDOWN

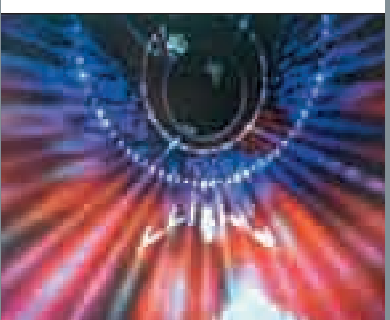
Don't like EA's *Madden* titles but still enjoy NFL-branded games? Then you're out of luck – a recent deal signed between the NFL and EA has granted the publisher exclusive rights to all NFL branding, leaving other games developers in the cold. Although detailed terms of the deal have yet to be announced, EA has admitted that the five-year agreement came at a 'premium price'. Rival companies have been quick to criticise the deal, claiming that it will "curb creativity and almost certainly lead to higher game prices".

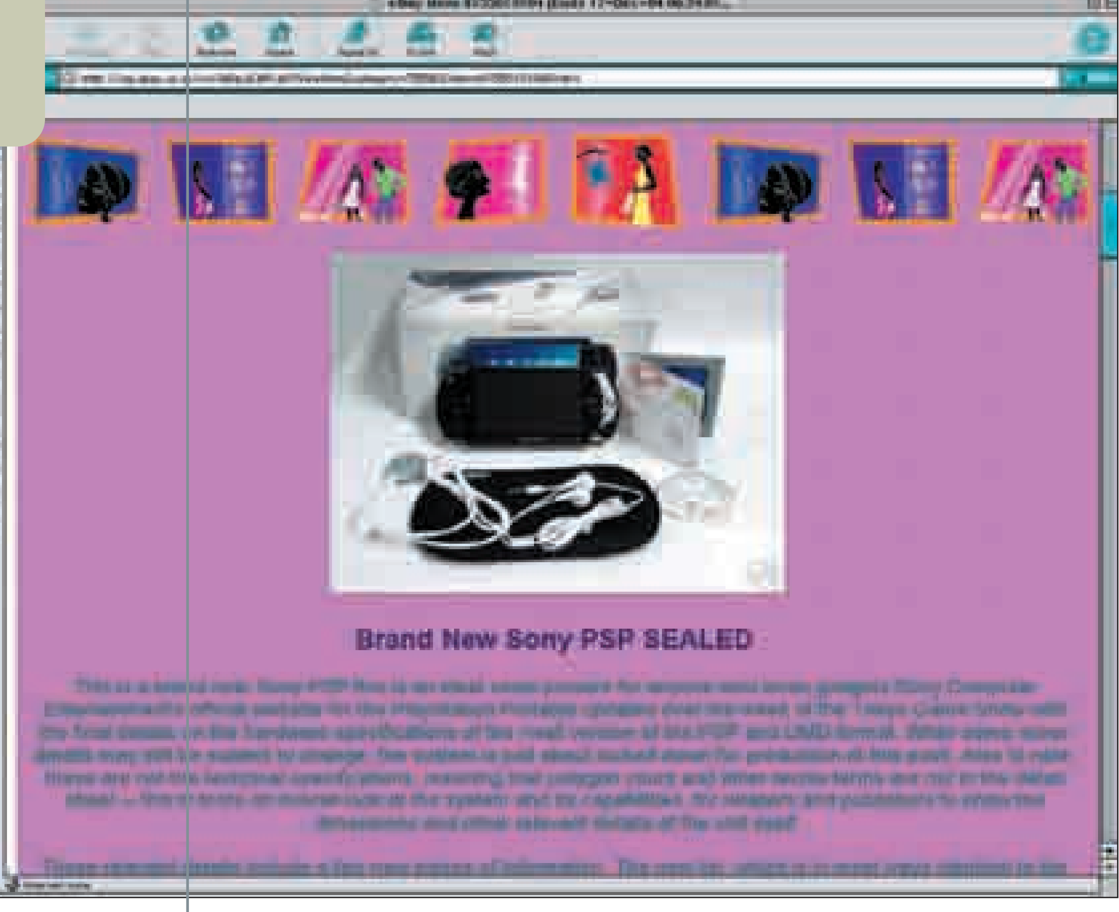




NO MORE UNITY

Proof that business is bad for gaming – development legend Jeff Minter and Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios have announced that *Unity*, a hugely anticipated GameCube project, has been cancelled due to a lack of commercial viability. Although the game appeared to show promise, it was considered that it would be in development for too long to be of any value to the Cube. "Both Lionhead and Jeff are disappointed that it has been necessary to take this step," said a Lionhead statement.





PSP HYPE BRINGS OUT AUCTION SCAMMERS

BAD BIDS

As gamers went crazy for Sony's PSP last month, an unscrupulous few saw an opportunity to con unwary shoppers. Sellers on internet auction site eBay duped buyers out of hundreds of pounds by exploiting gamers' eagerness to own the new handheld.

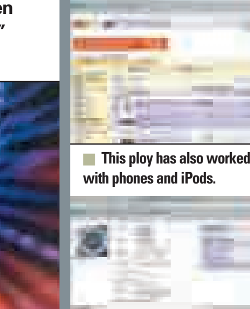
The trick works by playing on the naivety of new or infrequent eBay users. Appearing to be a legitimate auction for a PSP, the listing actually offers what is claimed to be a link to a website where you can buy the machine at a discount. Though the auctions do carry a disclaimer explaining that an actual machine is not for sale, it is normally placed at the end of a listing that's filled with an overwhelming amount of unnecessary text most casual shoppers won't think to read.

At the time of the PSP's launch, these auctions represented (by our estimation) about 40 per cent of all auctions displayed when searching on eBay for 'PSP'. While the frequency and diversity of the fake auctions was enough to make us wary of committing to auctions that were probably genuine, more of a concern were the high bids some of the deceptive listings were generating, climbing in some cases to well over £300.

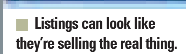
Out of moral duty and journalistic curiosity we decided to test eBay's policies on these types of auctions by seeing what would happen when we placed bids of £1 million on any auctions attracting high bids, thus saving the cash of any would-be winners.

To our surprise, many emails we received were not from sellers frustrated at our daft bids but were from fellow users warning us the auctions we were bidding on were false. In fact, when challenged none of the dodgy sellers bothered reporting our bidding tactics to eBay, probably because these misleading auctions are no longer protected by loopholes in eBay rules, with eBay itself closing a few of the more dubious auctions.

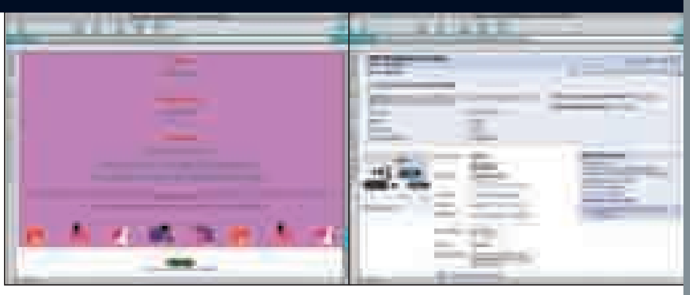
Still, despite the goodwill of fellow users and the occasional intervention of eBay, some buyers have still lost money. We spoke to one bidder who spent £117 pounds on a phoney auction for a Samsung D500 mobile phone. "I was conned by a user named jenna_123," the buyer said. "On the description of the item it said the condition



This ploy has also worked with phones and iPods.



Listings can look like they're selling the real thing.



"I AM NOT **TRYING TO CHEAT** PEOPLE – I EXPECT PEOPLE TO **READ THE LISTING**"
EBAY SELLER



was new and it went on to describe the phone. When I bid and won, the confirmation said the item was going to be emailed [rather than posted]. I emailed the seller asking if the confirmation was wrong and she emailed back quite nasty and said I had just won a link on how to get a Samsung D500 for £20… [Payment] had gone through within ten minutes of paying." This buyer filed a report, though as we go to press has yet to receive a refund.

We tried to contact jenna_123 but got no reply. Another seller posting misleading auctions, benard2431, did respond, saying: "I am not trying to cheat people. I expect bidders to read the whole description before bidding… If you do not read the item fully you're cheating yourself."

When asked what was being done to combat these auctions, eBay said efforts were ongoing. "Nearly 1,000 employees at eBay and PayPal… are dedicated to making eBay one of the safest places in the world to trade," said an eBay representative. The company denied that users were becoming disillusioned with the service, saying that two billion transactions were "testament to the success and safety of the site". But for those buyers out of pocket, it might not seem that way.



Misleading auctions have left some bidders out of pocket.

SMALL PRINT

While it's obvious that buyers should read all lot listings thoroughly, eBay offers other tips to make sure that bidders aren't swindled…

- **Read the item description carefully. Avoid making assumptions about details that aren't included.**
- **Check the seller's feedback – you'll see what other buyers have had to say about doing business with the seller.**
- **Ask the seller questions if you're unsure about any aspect of the item.**
- **Make sure the item is legal. If you have any doubts as to whether the item you're interested in is allowed, check eBay's policies on prohibited and questionable items.**
- **Research the item's value. Look at similar completed eBay listings, visit online stores that sell similar items, and ask friends, and determine what the item is worth in any other way you can think of.**



NOT ANOTHER…

VALVE STORY

VALVE KEEPS SHOWING THAT IT'S NOT TO BE CROSSED

Will people never learn? A further 30,000 accounts on Valve's digital distribution system, Steam, have now been disabled by the *Half-Life 2* developer after attempts were made to pirate the game, bringing the total number of accounts that have been deactivated up to a massive 50,000.

Although these measures were put in place to prevent hackers from interfering with *Half-Life 2*, as a bonus (for Valve, anyway) these account closures will also disable any other Valve games on systems associated with those accounts, which will even include any title purchased legitimately.

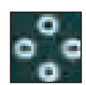
Valve's Erik Johnson posted a message on the Steam forums to announce this further wave of deactivations, saying: "Valve disabled more than 30,000 Steam accounts which had been used to try to illegally gain access to Valve games without a valid purchase," he said. "Valve takes such activities seriously and reserves the right to disable Steam accounts engaging in piracy, cheating, illegal activities or any other activity in violation of the Steam Subscriber Agreement. The accounts that are disabled today will not be reactivated."

Despite there being several cases where users have claimed that their accounts have been disabled unfairly – which could prove costly for legitimate players who have to buy their software again – Valve's aggressive stance on piracy has generally been welcomed and praised by gamers and the industry alike.

However, this anti-piracy work will be continuing as bootleg copies of the game that weren't obtained via Steam are still doing the rounds.

Data Stream

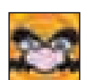
BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



SEGA GOES GIZZY

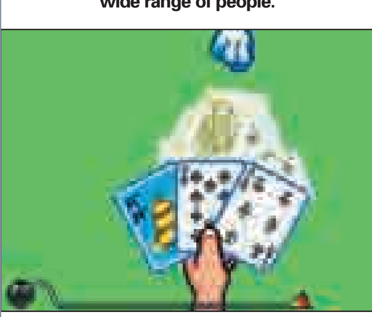
The Gizmondo is about to join the emulation party and offer gamers a variety of classic Sega titles to play on the move. The collection – which is set to include games such as *OutRun, Shinobi, Golden Axe* and, of course, *Sonic The Hedgehog* – should be released later this year. "The Sega brand is synonymous with gameplay and quality," said Steven Law, Gizmondo Europe's COO. "These games hold a special attraction to the traditional early adopter, but equally represent entirely new territory for those that missed the 16-bit revolution."

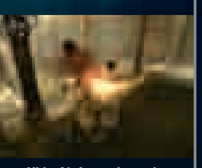




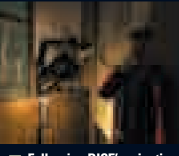
'I GOTTA WIN!'

In what will no doubt be seen as a massive pat on the back for innovation, Nintendo's latest GBA game in the *Made In Wario* series (*Mawaru! Made In Wario*) has been awarded the top prize in the Entertainment category at the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs' annual Media Arts Festival. The game, which requires players to tilt, move and spin the GBA in order to complete mini-games, bested over 200 other entries (including music videos, games and websites) and was praised by the Agency for its innovative style and ability to appeal to a wide range of people.

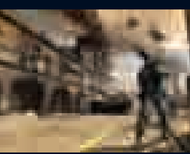




Ubisoft's fantastic track record combined with EA's clout would be unstoppable.



Following DICE's rejection of an EA buyout, Ubisoft bosses might be hostile.



EA is still trying to claim a stake in Digital Illusions.



AN UNHOLY UNION

EA'S ACQUISITION STEAMROLLER KEEPS ON TRUCKIN'

"I think you're going to see consolidation in the next three to five years, where there are fewer competitors to us than there are today." So said Larry Probst, Electronic Arts' CEO at last year's E3, in a statement that, considering recent events in the world of EA, is oddly prescient. While the concept of EA buying up the more choice developers is nothing new, thoughts of the US giant moving in on some of its global publishing competitors are more worrying – particularly when the company at the top of the EA hit-list is the owner of the second largest development studio in the world, Ubisoft.

That either party has yet to comment on EA's proposed plan to buy 20 per cent of the French publisher, as revealed by the *Wall Street Journal* at the end of December, is telling, as such an announcement will raise eyebrows – and concerns – among the development community. At a cost of $85-100 million, EA has taken a massive step in a direction that many may have thought to be off-limits until now. The consolidation of the games industry, while obviously profitable to some, is a highly dangerous prospect when it comes to everything from creativity and originality to fundamentals such as the treatment of staff, and any steps towards it must be taken with caution.

But that hasn't stopped EA moving its plans forward – even if obstacles get in the way. That's what happened when shareholders of Swedish developer Digital Illusions CE refused a buyout by EA. Rather than being put off, EA's decision to change the conditions of its bid – specifically, reducing its share acceptance level from 90 per cent to 50 per cent – shows its determination to get its teeth into DICE. Such a change to the deal is almost guaranteed to force it through by the new acceptance date of 20 January (now passed as you read this), even though no change in the offer price of 61 kronor (about £4.70) per share has been made.

The DICE shareholders' argument – that remaining independent will be more beneficial to the developer with the upcoming releases of *Battlefield 2* and *Battlefield: Modern Combat* – seems to make sense, but there's no stopping big business, and they don't come much bigger than EA.



LONG-ESTABLISHED PUBLISHER SUCCUMBS TO BANKRUPTCY

LE RENARD C'EST MORT

Beleaguered French publisher Titus Interactive has been declared bankrupt. The judge handling the company's receivership case ended proceedings early, effectively winding up the company for good.

The decision, made earlier this month, comes ahead of the date set by the courts for Titus to initiate new financial plans that would allow it to stay afloat. While the publisher originally had until the end of January to present a solution, the judge felt that "Titus was unable to finance any new games" according to his statement to French newspaper *La Tribune*, leaving it with "no hope of financial rectification".

Those with experience of Titus' past catalogue will agree that this decision has been a long time coming, with fairly average titles on the Amiga and SNES such as *Blues Brothers* and *Prehistorik* giving way in later years to dross like *Superman 64*, *Robocop* and the ownright awful update of *Barbarian*.

However, the bankruptcy leaves the firm's subsidiaries – specifically Avalon Interactive (previously Virgin Interactive) and Interplay – in a precarious position, with Interplay in particular facing hardship having been stripped of its assets by Titus founder Herve Caen. Although both companies will continue for the time being, the likelihood of each being liquidated in the near future to cover Titus' €33 million debt is relatively high.



Robocop and *Barbarian* didn't do Titus any favours.

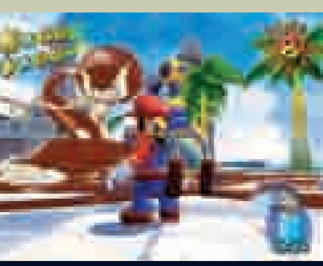
games™ THE TOP FIVE

WISH YOU WERE HERE?



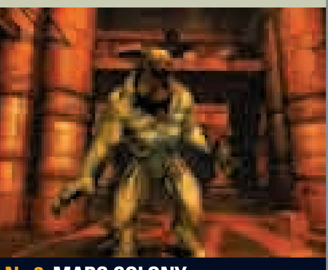
No.5 NORRATH

Too many Orcs for our liking



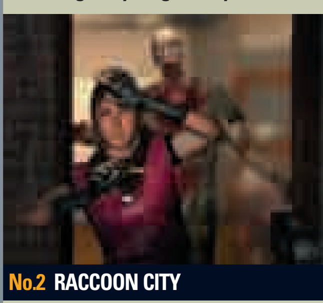
No.4 ISLE DELPHINO

Paintbrushes not included



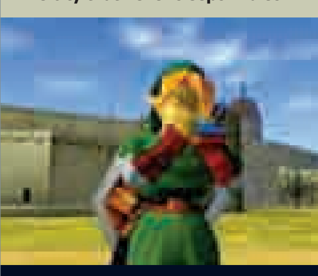
No.3 MARS COLONY

Warning: may be gateway to Hell



No.2 RACCOON CITY

The city that never sleeps… dies



No.1 HYRULE

An adventure round every corner



SLOWLY BUT SURELY

PS3 GRAPHICS HARDWARE ON TARGET FOR END OF THE YEAR

It appears that Sony's PlayStation3 is finally becoming more than just a series of rumours. Nvidia CEO Jen-Hsun Huang has confirmed that his company's work on the machine's graphics processor will be completed by the end of 2005.

Speaking to US investment firm Morgan Stanley, Huang commented on Nvidia's agreement with Sony to produce a custom-built processor for the upcoming PS3 – a collaboration that failed to surprise many people in the industry, following Nvidia's falling-out with Microsoft over royalties for its work on the Xbox.

"This next-generation architecture took several hundred people several years to build, but this specific implementation of that architecture should take about 50 engineers," said Huang. "It's something we're running full throttle on. I have every expectation that we will be able to see final production silicon later on in the year."

Incorporating the next-generation of Nvidia's GeForce technology, the suggestion of the custom GPU being ready sooner rather than later does tie in with Sony's plans to launch the PS3 in the first half of 2006. However, with ATi currently hard at work on the graphics processor for Xbox 2, Huang was keen to distance the PS3's GPU from the company's previous PC-based chipsets. "It's nothing to do with Windows," insisted Huang. "It doesn't use any of the Windows features and it's not about driving Windows. It's not about the PC at all."

Data stream
BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION

With the disappointment of *Driv3r* behind him, Martin Edmondson – founder of Atari-owned developer Reflections and man behind the whole *Driver* series – has stepped down from his position as managing and creative director of the studio. Although he has yet to announce details of his future plans, it is expected that he will continue working within the games industry. "Reflections remains home to a team of talented and committed people and I wish them all a great deal of success in the future," Edmondson said.

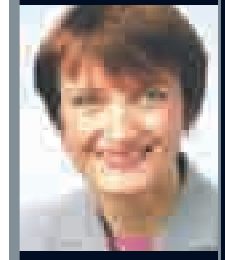




ALL GONE QUIET OVER THERE

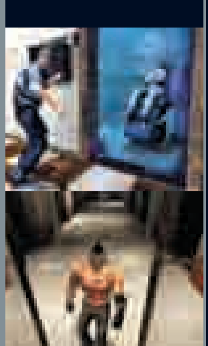
The series may have enjoyed relative success in the past, but it appears that the *Club Football* brand has been placed on hold following Codemasters' decision to suspend work on the latest batch of games, making 18 people redundant. While the concept of releasing team-specific versions of the same game appealed to some, competition from *FIFA* and *Pro Evolution Soccer* may have led to the series being brought to an end permanently. "We are taking time out to reassess our strategy in the football action genre," said Gary Dunn, Codemasters' development director.





■ Tessa Jowell has praised the industry's attitude.





■ *Manhunt* – famous for all the wrong reasons.



ELSPA TO PIONEER AWARENESS OF VIDEOGAME AGE RESTRICTIONS

SOMEBODY THINK OF THE CHILDREN

The Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association has confirmed it's developing proposals intended to improve consumer awareness of videogame age ratings.

This drive comes after Elspa attended a meeting to discuss the issues of age rating awareness with representatives from the British government, developer group TIGA, the Video Standards Council, the British Board of Film Classification and the British Association of Record Dealers.

The meeting was considered a great success, with all parties agreeing on the problems faced and the measures required to deal with the issue. "We are delighted with the very positive discussions held with the government and are pleased to embrace a collective approach to this issue," said Roger Bennett, director general of Elspa.

"A number of initiatives were discussed at the meeting," continued Bennett. "They will be formulated to create specific proposals to promote greater understanding, recognition and awareness of the games rating system, ensuring that young people are not exposed to inappropriate content.

"Our goal is and has always been co-operation, action and results," he concluded.

Age ratings are often ignored by parents, a fact the media has made a point of illustrating in news reports and TV programmes aired since the murder of Stefan Pakeerah in August 2004 (Rockstar's *Manhunt* was said to have incited Pakeerah's killer). Elspa aims to change ideas parents have about games, getting the message across that games are for adults as much as children – just like movies – and as such age ratings should be seriously acknowledged.

"The industry agreed with the government that we needed to make sure that the 18 classification system is understood and enforced," said UK secretary of state for culture, media and sport Tessa Jowell, speaking of the meeting's success and describing the outcome as "very positive".

> "ADULTS CAN MAKE INFORMED CHOICES ABOUT WHAT GAMES TO PLAY"
> TESSA JOWELL, CULTURE SECRETARY

"Adults can make informed choices about what games to play," Jowell continued, "[but] children can't and they deserve to be protected. The industry will consider how to make sure parents know what games their children should and shouldn't play. Their responsible attitude is very welcome."

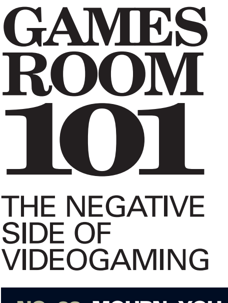
While we see these moves to ensure parents are better advised as a step in the right direction, we'd also like to see tougher regulation for retailers too. When tested, many retailers fail to restrict sales of rated games to under-age gamers and if this continues the media will never believe that children are being adequately protected by age ratings.

STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT

AWARDS SHOW BRAND EXPANDS INTO TELEVISION SERIES

Game Stars is to be turned into a ten-episode television series instead of a one-off gaming awards show, organisers of the popular event have announced.

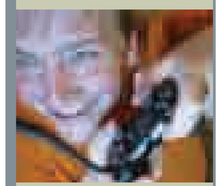
Previously, Game Stars was an annual awards TV special, used as the high-profile brand for the Game Stars Live consumer games event.



However, this year the awards-centric show will be transformed into a proper ten-part series delivering, according to the show's makers, "the latest games information and a new innovative format" as well as a "nationwide games challenge [titled] The Hunt For The UK's Greatest Gamer" that we're hoping will yield slightly more attractive participants than last year. In addition, the series will feature a consumer show special, covering this year's Game Stars Live, and will culminate in an awards special.

"Gaming has changed so much in recent years," said Martin Lowde, ITV's director of licensing. "The increasing maturity of gamers has created an appealing demographic and it's a programming area we are very keen to develop. The Game Stars brand we have developed for TV and associated spin-off activities, such as the brilliant consumer exhibition, works very well. It may be that we have to look at the brand and its development, given the desire we have to develop a series."

The Game Stars TV series will run throughout the summer and early autumn on ITV. We'll bring you further details as we get them.



Now you can get ten weeks of Game Star action.



LORDS OF THE REALM



INDUSTRY VETERAN LANDS NEW YEAR HONOUR

The number of games developers with letters after their name rose by one earlier this month, with Lionhead founder and industry veteran Peter Molyneux receiving an OBE for his services to the games industry in the Queen's New Year Honours list.

Molyneux, who founded both the ground-breaking developer Bullfrog in 1987 and then Lionhead Studios in 1997, will pick up his gong at a ceremony later this year.

"It's come completely out of the blue," said Molyneux. "I never would have guessed that I'd have that kind of honour."

Molyneux has already been crowned a Development Legend at the industry's Develop awards last September. He joins Argonaut founder Jez San as one of the industry's rare OBE holders.

Obviously, 2004 was a good year for Lionhead thanks to *Fable* (the action RPG co-developed by Molyneux and Big Blue Box) proving hugely popular on the Xbox, and the OBE will no doubt come as the cherry on a well-iced cake.

However, it seems as though 2005 is just as likely to be a success with upcoming titles such as *The Movies* and *Black & White 2* already garnering great interest.

GAMES ROOM 101



THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF VIDEOGAMING

NO. 28: MOURN, YOU MERRY WIDOWS

Recently, an article about gaming widows in the Technology section of the BBC's website caught our eye… and in turn, made us sigh with exasperation. Initially, it looked like a brief and somewhat pointless piece about one woman moaning about her partner playing games, which culminated in a sweeping comment on how gaming was destroying relationships. Yet just below, headlined by an invitation for readers to 'tell us about your experiences', were tirades from embittered women (and men) determined to have their say on the matter. "I was with a gamer for years and in the end there was only one solution: he got dumped," said Katie from Bournemouth, which was a typical response.

Now, we're not saying that they're all wrong – after all, relationships do take work – but at the same time, such moaning is often unnecessary. So your partner has a hobby… big deal. Why don't you get one too? Find something you enjoy and get on with it – chances are, your gaming partner won't spend all their time moaning about it. You might even discover you like playing games. A hobby that you can share? You never know…



A widow, yesterday – possibly mourning the loss of her husband to a nasty case of *Halo 2*

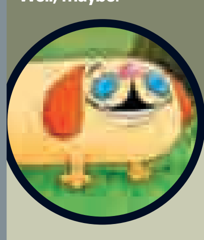
Online gaming is one of the worst culprits for keeping gamers away from their spouses.



SEPARATED AT BIRTH

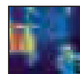
games™ tracks down those videogame lookalikes

Who can forget the loveable Moog from *Willo The Wisp*? Not Konami, clearly – otherwise it wouldn't have modelled the bizarre drum-dog things from *Taiko no Tatsujin* after him. Well, maybe.



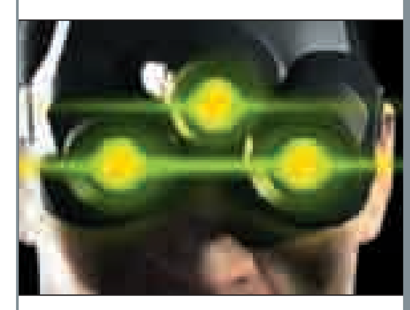


BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



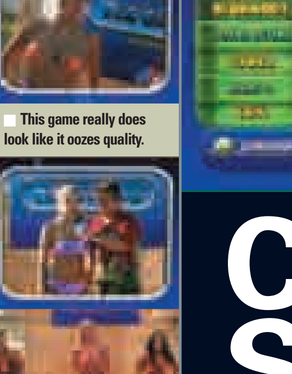
BIG FISHER, SMALL POND

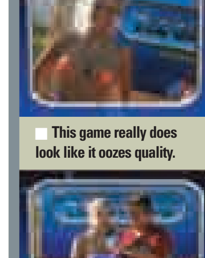
Tom Clancy's novels may have inspired many a videogame, but it's good to see that things work the other way round too with just as much success; *Splinter Cell*, a book based on Ubisoft's original brand, has hit the *New York Times* top ten bestseller list for paperback fiction. The novel, which landed at number eight in the chart, is the first instance of a Tom Clancy book taking cues from its videogame counterparts and will no doubt help create yet another lucrative line of titles from which the veteran writer can collect some royalties, especially since Ubisoft has also confirmed that talks are already under way in Hollywood to turn the *Splinter Cell* licence into an action film.

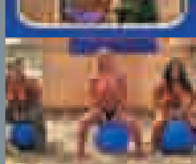




This game really does look like it oozes quality.







It's hardly *University Challenge*, frankly.

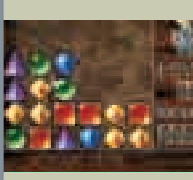
CAN I SEE SOME ID?

SNAP-HAPPY TAKE 2 LANDS ITSELF IN HOT WATER

It may be nothing more than an awful quiz show-style game, but Take 2's *The Guy Game* has been removed from shelves in the US for a slightly more serious reason – it contains lewd footage of an underage girl.

The girl – who is known only as Jane Doe for obvious reasons – was only 17 when she was filmed taking her top off during spring break on Texas' South Padre Island. She has claimed that *The Guy Game* (which rewards players with pictures of scantily-clad women, for which the girl was taped, when they answer a question correctly) did not give consent for her image to be used and that it has caused her humiliation, embarrassment and shame. Judges in Texas agreed and ordered the game out of shops.

While we suspect the case will be settled out of court by the firms involved – including Take 2, Sony and Microsoft – the fact that a girl who was still a minor made it into the game will almost certainly raise questions concerning the rest of the title's content.



Elkware already has a good mobile pedigree.

BAGGING A TROPHY BUCK

INFOSPACE CONTINUES ITS SHOPPING SPREE

It would seem that Infospace is to the mobile industry what EA is to videogames – if only because the US wireless firm has bought up yet another mobile games developer, the third in the space of a year. This time, the German publisher/developer Elkware is on the receiving end of a buyout, with a reported $26 million being paid out for the privilege.

The deal, which has come hot on the heels of Infospace's purchase of UK-based developer Iomo in December last year, will add over 90 extra titles (including a number of games licensed from the likes of Pamela Anderson and *The X-Files*) to Infospace's current portfolio, as well as providing the firm with valuable ties to leading network operators such as Orange, T-Mobile, Vodafone and 02.

Elkware's new owner has claimed that it will not be making any major changes to its latest purchase and will let it continue with its current approach, which has seen it grow into one of the largest developers of mobile content in Europe. Together with Iomo and Atlas Mobile, Elkware will form part of Infospace Mobile, which should be a force to be reckoned with.

"say what you see"

Meaningless waffle from the industry

THIS MONTH Martin Edmondson, realising that *Driv3r* probably didn't do Reflections any favours, talks about his resignation:

"I still feel a great sense of attachment to the studio and am very sad to leave – Reflections remains home to a team of talented and committed people"

games™ says: Really? Are you honestly that sad to be leaving? Then why don't you stay? Oh, no, that's right – *Driv3r*. Forgot about that. Sorry…

MORE FROM MR CHIPS NEXT MONTH!



RISING THROUGH THE RANKS FROM PHONE ANSWERER TO PRODUCER OF ONE OF THE LARGEST EVER ONLINE SERIES CAN'T BE AN EASY TASK. GAMES™ CATCHES UP WITH JAMIL DAWSARI TO FIND OUT HOW IT'S DONE…



"THE GOOD IDEAS THAT WE NEVER THOUGHT OF ALWAYS COME FROM THE PLAYERS AFTER THE GAME'S OUT. WE CAN'T WAIT TO SEE WHAT THEY'LL COME UP WITH THIS TIME"

JAMIL DAWSARI

JAMIL DAWSARI

ELECTRONIC ARTS

It might be practically sub-zero outside EA's imposing Chertsey headquarters, but inside it's almost cosy as 30 computers gently hum together in a testing room. The machines are waiting for eager gamers to strap on their headsets and begin playing what could be one of the biggest online games of 2005 – *Battlefield 2*. Hosting this gaming session is EA producer Jamil Dawsari, who – even after flying all the way from Digital Illusions in Stockholm, where he's based – is bubbling over with enthusiasm for DICE's latest title and is more than happy to give us an insight into how he ended up producing such a high-profile game.

"I actually started with EA on the phones and followed a very standard career path until I ended up where I am today," begins Dawsari. "I just climbed with each title I worked on and eventually landed myself the *Battlefield* series which required me to move out to Sweden."

Being involved with a company as large as EA pretty much ensures that there'll always be new games to work on, and Dawsari's rise through the ranks has seen him involved with a wide range of projects.

"The first game I ever worked on was *Extreme Pinball*," he remembers. "Although I'm very fond of the game I was disappointed with how it performed; it deserved to have much more done with it. Out of all the games I've worked on, I have to say that the *Battlefield* series has been my favourite. The team of people I've been working with are exceptional and considering the way *Battlefield 2* is shaping up it's looking like it could be my favourite of all of them."

The *Battlefield* series that Dawsari speaks of so highly has been a huge player in the online gaming world and over the last few years has provided gamers with several titles and expansion packs, but creating games about war in times when real conflicts are raging and concern over game content is at an all time high must be a tricky business.

"It's something that we do have to worry about," Dawsari says. "But the *Battlefield* series has never been about the violence. We've been very careful with *Battlefield 2* and made sure it has as few connections to real wars as we could. Instead of naming actual countries in the area we've created the Middle-Eastern Coalition force. There's no blood and no graphic violence – it's very possible to make games of this type without resorting to these things. It's all about gameplay and fun."

A lot of hard work has clearly been ploughed into the latest *Battlefield* title, and it seems the teams at EA and DICE have been so busy they haven't even had a chance to reflect on what the upcoming next-generation consoles might mean for the industry.

"It's obviously all very exciting but to be honest we've all been so busy with *Battlefield 2* and had so little time to stick our heads out of the trenches that we've not had the chance to see what's coming" Dawsari admits. "Having been locked away for so long I'm not the best person to give my opinion but we always look forward to new challenges. In exactly the same way, many recent games that I've been meaning to play have just slipped past me because I haven't had the time to sit down with them. I'm really into my RTSs and there are so many around at the moment that I want to make a start on. I've been planning on giving *Battle For Middle-Earth* a play for some time now – who knows, maybe when *Battlefield 2* is out of way I'll have the time."

With *Battlefield 2* due out in a matter of weeks, it looks like Jamil will soon have that precious time he needs to do some catching up – unless, of course, there's a new project waiting for him…

"Well, I suppose if you asked my wife what was going to be next for me she'd probably say it was vacation time," he laughs. "In fact, if you were to ask me, I'd have to say it was vacation time as well. At the moment it's really not clear where the *Battlefield* series will be headed after number two, so nobody really knows what will happen next. I guess we'll just have to wait and see…"

Battlefield 2 is out in Q1 2005 on PC and was previewed in issue 27.



LETTER FROM AMERICA

WITH YOUR FRIENDLY EX-PATRIOT, THE SHAPE

"JUST BEFORE THANKSGIVING A SENSATIONAL STORY BROKE: A YOUR OWN REAL LIVE TURKEY OVER THE INTERNET,

"Be vewy, vewy quiet – we're hunting Americans."

The *Saturday Night Live* Christmas special this season had a sketch about Santa opting not to deliver gifts to the states that voted Bush – the red states, as they are known from the Republican hue applied to them on election night – on account of their apparent lunacy. Showing his revised delivery map to Rudolph, we could see that Santa had labelled this massive redneck repository between the two liberal, blue coasts of the United States as 'Dumbf**kistan' (his stars, not mine). Leave it to someone from the biggest, reddest state of all then to combine real shooting with videogame ideals.

Just prior to Thanksgiving – which not only brings families together to devour roast foods but also heralds the start of hunting season, when men's men wear bright orange jackets and head into the woods to kill things – a sensational story broke on the news networks: a man was going to let you shoot your own real live turkey over the internet, using a webcam rigged to a rifle.

John Lockwood of San Antonio, Texas, has engineered the first real FPS at his website, live-shot.com. The way he has it set up, paying visitors may book a 20 minute slot, during which time they may fire actual 22-calibre rifles at paper targets on his land, via their web browser. For $9.95 extra, customers may also request a DVD of their session with all the detail and sound not afforded by the webcam. The rig really works like an FPS, albeit an incredibly slow and somewhat clunky one. Using a combination DV cam/webcam mounted next to a rifle on a motorised gyro, you can turn left and right, aim up and down, zoom and fire, all with clicks of the mouse.

This is just the beginning. Lockwood's next step is to employ his internet shooting system with live animals. He already owns and runs a large hunting ground for hunters who physically visit for the privilege, like all other current hunting grounds; the integration of the two enterprises would be simple, practically if not legally. Since the story broke, the Parks & Wildlife Department of Texas has been racing to keep ahead of Lockwood's advances, leaving obstacles in its wake to slow him down if nothing else until it gets a handle on this very modern issue.

The Department has rallied to draw up regulations that, if adopted, would prevent anyone from being able to use the internet to shoot animals that qualify as 'game': the Thanksgiving turkey, deer, quail, things like that. Animals classed as 'exotics', however, are not within the control of Parks & Wildlife, so Lockwood has simply shifted his aim to breeds of deer, such as the Axis, as well as some unfortunate boars that fall into this 'exotic' category. It may not be long before web surfers are firing at foxes with Firefox or going on safari with Safari.

The whole episode brings to mind a plethora of pertinent



MAN WAS GOING TO LET YOU SHOOT USING A WEBCAM RIGGED TO A RIFLE"

issues, not least the deadly storm of random gunfire one imagines might erupt every time Lockwood's copy of Windows crashes. Shooting at targets: okay, neat gimmick. But killing something, taking an actual life, with all the casual detachment of a videogame… you could be thousands of miles away in your jammies with a mug of cocoa, clicking your mouse and destroying a living creature. Is that right? What if you should be online, panning the camera left and right in search of pigs that would look great mounted above the fireplace, when you spot a human hunter, maybe Lockwood himself? If you click on his head to fire the gun, did you kill him? Or did an electronically controlled weapon in another state just misfire?

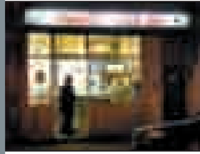
The story of live-shot.com slipped suddenly below the radar when the next big story of the hunting season broke just days afterward, that of six deer hunters in Wisconsin falling prey themselves, allegedly to another hunter named Chai Vang who appears to have gone batshit insane while sitting up a tree with his gun. Thus, the entrepreneurial John Lockwood and his latest venture are out of the media view and we likely won't hear anything else about him until he either pulls this thing off or is shot to death by hackers. I'll let you know.

Many thanks



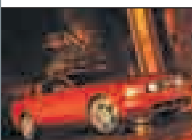
MISS ABOUT BRITAIN…

Chippy smell



LOVE ABOUT AMERICA…

2005 Mustang



GOT ANY QUESTIONS FOR THE SHAPE? THEN JUST DROP HIM A LINE AT: theshape@comcast.net YOU MIGHT GET A REPLY… OR POSSIBLY JUST THE FINGER.

AMERIKAAN

PRODUCTS, PLACES, SERVICES AND EVENTS FROM THE LAND OF THE FREE

PLOW KING



You've seen that *Simpsons* episode where Homer becomes Mr Plow? People actually do that. When it snows, from out of nowhere civilian pick-up trucks suddenly have great big iron plows on the front. We don't know if people charge or do it for fun or what.

US MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

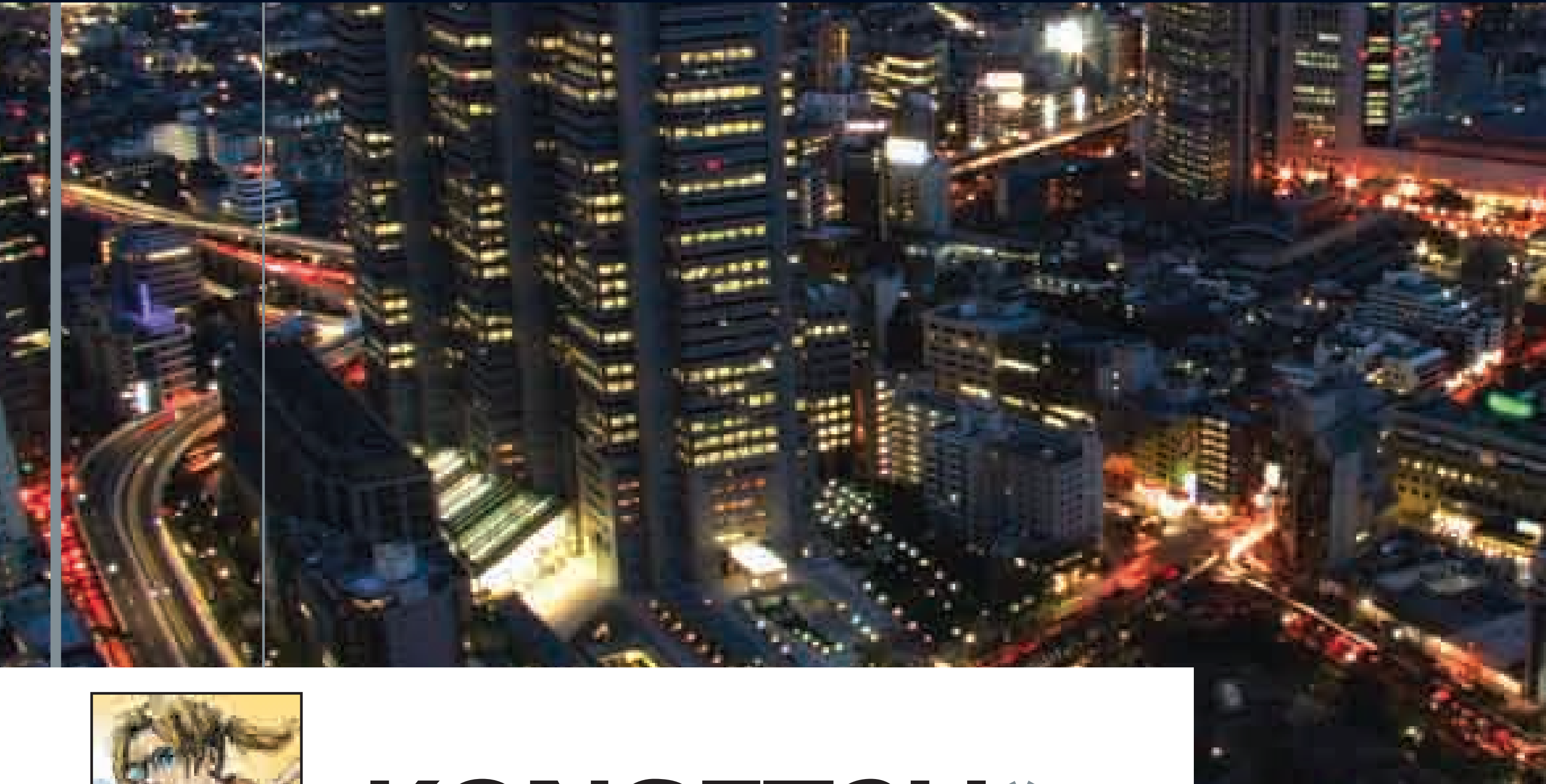
	Title	Publisher	Format
1	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar	PS2
2	Halo 2	Microsoft	Xbox
3	Call Of Duty: Finest Hour	Activision	PS2
4	Need For Speed Underground 2	EA Games	PS2
5	Knights Of The Old Republic II	LucasArts	Xbox
6	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	Konami	PS2
7	Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 3	Atari	PS2
8	Killzone	SCEA	PS2
9	Star Wars: Battlefront	LucasArts	PS2
10	WWE Smackdown! Vs RAW	THQ	PS2

(Updated 06/01/04)



GTA: San Andreas

Halo 2



KONGETSU*

WITH JAPANESE CORRESPONDENT TIM ROGERS

"THE FIRST FEW HOURS OF THE PSP'S LIFE SAW A FEW HUNDRED MACHINES AND TURNING THEM OVER TO THE CHINESE

So the PSP launched on 12 December 2004. My esteemed colleagues BT Amazawa, Chuck Franklin and myself were in Akihabara on the night before the launch. Chuck and I didn't wait in line overnight because we didn't need to. I, for one, already had a PSP. Chuck didn't have one, yet was able to buy one just ten minutes after 9pm on 11 December thanks to the Lam Tarra video store in Akihabara, which broke the street date by 12 hours. They sold us the PSP and copies of *Ridge Racers* and *Minna no Golf*, and then warned us about keeping silent. "We don't want to get into trouble with Sony," they said. Don't worry, the name and location of your store is safe with us.

By the time six in the morning rolled around, Chuck and I were at the Yodobashi Camera in West Shinjuku. Ken Kutaragi gave a speech in front of television cameras, telling them that his 'biggest fear' had been that someone would hijack a truck of PSPs; the preceding question had been positioned to get him to comment on the DS. Kutaragi's a deft guy.

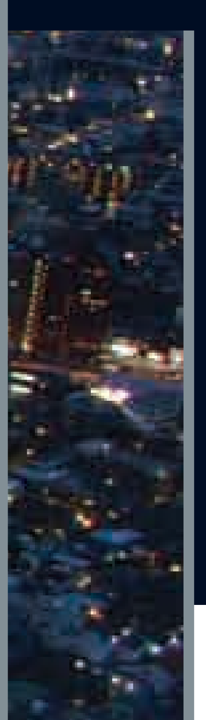
And the Chinese mafia is downright audacious. Though the first in line to buy a pre-ordered PSP was a student, the second through five-hundredth slots were filled mostly with cabbage-stinking vagrants. We noticed it like this: Chuck and I stood with a reporter for *Famitsu*, chatting about the screen size and the gorgeousness of the frame rate and how girls were talking to us because of a videogame, when this smelly short guy with a long white beard and leathery skin stumbled between us, holding a PSP in a special Yodobashi Camera launch-day bag. He held his change in his hand, and turned around and around, mouth gaping confusedly.

Soon, a long-fingered Chinese woman grabbed the crook of his arm. "This way!" she screeched at him. Chuck, myself and the *Famitsu* reporter narrowed our eyes. We watched them retreat; a minute later, we followed. Just around the corner, 12 hard-hitters like you'd see in a John Woo movie were waiting to take the homeless man's PSP and throw it in a van. They then gave him ¥3,000 (about £15) and told him to hit the road. He walked away, licking his index finger and counting the money again and again. It was a horribly sad sight.

The next two hours saw a few hundred homeless men buying PSPs and turning them over to the Chinese mafia for ¥3,000 a head. In the name of investigation, BT and I brought out the Yodobashi Camera's manager and explained the situation. He sighed. "You know, people are people," he said. "If this were… well, if this were China, we'd be able to look at a homeless person and say, 'Look, we know what you're on to, screw off.' We can't do that here, though. Human rights and all." He took a long breath. "That's just how it is. It's a free market.

The PSP is set to become loved by gamers, vagrants and Mafiosi…





TEACH YOURSELF JAPANESE

LESSON TWENTY EIGHT	ORDERING AROUND YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER
Hitotsu itteii? Tabetara sutete!	May I say just one thing? If you eat [something], throw away [the wrapper]!
Hitotsu itteii? Taberu toki ni tabete!	May I say just one thing? Dinnertime is for eating [not doing something else]!
Hitotsu itteii? Hito no ryouri tabetara monku iwanaide!	May I say just one thing? If you eat someone else's cooking, don't just complain!
Hitotsu itteii? Watashi no mane wo shinaide!	May I say just one thing? Don't imitate me!
Hitotsu itteii? Neru toki ni futon no naka ni PSP wo yaranaide!	May I say just one thing? At bedtime, don't play PSP while inside [the blanket of] your futon!

HOMELESS MEN BUYING THE MAFIA FOR ¥3,000 A HEAD"

People can buy and sell these things as they choose. And besides – we don't lose money from this. Sony doesn't, either, exactly. This whole mafia scheme is just a way of making money off the mark-up. Creating a shortage and then benefiting from it. You know."

He was full of words, and politely trying not to let them out. Something told me he almost envied the Chinese mafia. Yet something else told me he didn't. He had his business suit, his laid-back attitude and his 'Sony PSP Launch' kimono-shirt. The Chinese men were dirty and screaming. One of them, though, Chuck was quick to point out, was wearing a *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* T-shirt. "Maybe he's a videogame fan called in by the mafia for advising?" I suggested.

"Or maybe they're the videogame mafia?!" BT Amazawa suggested. Dammit, there's no such thing as the videogame mafia. I refuse to speak more on the subject. Now back to loading Japanese punk rock MP3's onto one of these ten new iPods I found…

Kind regards



BATTERY LIVES

Us three compatriots relaxed in the nearest McDonald's, full of PSP owners as it was, just before eight in the morning. We took turns sleeping, talking and beating the ever-loving hell out of the PSP's battery in the name of science by wireless-battling other patrons in *Ridge Racers*. Our battery, which we charged to full and released at 4:37am, would die at 10:41am. Out of the box, it lasted all of two hours. Charged, it lasted six hours and four minutes. So there you have it.

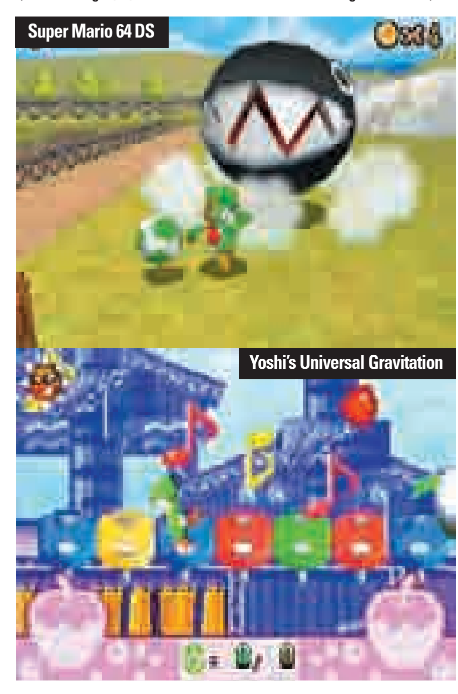
After a while I broke down and bought some pancakes and potatoes, as well as orange juice and apple pie. After I finished the pie, Chuck wouldn't let me touch his PSP as it was already getting greasy. "What about the DS?" "Sure, go for it." He'd had a PSP for a day, and already thought nothing of the DS. I got out the DS, and, well, he has no games for it. So I Pictochatted with myself until moments later, when someone else jumped in the room. We chatted a little bit about the PSP. She said she didn't want one. Yes – it was a girl! I looked around and around. I couldn't see her. She said she was on the second floor. I went and took a look.

There she was, in a Nirvana T-shirt, looking over song lyrics she was writing in a little Korean-bought notebook. Interesting! Meeting her face-to-face made both of us shy. Then her boyfriend got out of the bathroom with his PSP in hand. The first thought on my mind, however, was not, "Damn, she has a boyfriend" – it was "OH MY GOD… I CAN PLAY *ARMORED CORE* ON THE TOILET NOW, CAN'T I?!"

JAPANESE MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

	Title	Publisher	Format
1	DW/FF in Itadaki Street Special	Square Enix	PS2
2	Super Mario 64 DS	Nintendo	DS
3	Mario Party 6	Nintendo	GC
4	Yoshi Universal Gravitation	Nintendo	GBA
5	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	Konami	PS2
6	Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat	Nintendo	GC
7	Sawaru! Made In Wario	Nintendo	DS
8	Rockman Battle Network 5	Capcom	GBA
9	Dragon Quest VIII	Square Enix	PS2
10	Konjiki no Gashbell!! 2	Banpresto	GBA

(Week ending 26/12/04 © 2004 Media Create Co. Ltd. All Rights Reserved)


Super Mario 64 DS
Yoshi's Universal Gravitation

"GOOD STRATEGY GAMES SHOULD NOT BE COMPLICATED. TO ME, SIMPLE RULES ARE A KEY TO ANY GAME"

BENEDIKT GRINDEL

BENEDIKT GRINDEL

BLUE BYTE

Whether you relish the thought of spending your spare time collecting wood and minerals, or even if you have no patience with real-time strategy games, you'll probably have heard of *The Settlers*. The fifth instalment in the big series full of tiny people – *Heritage Of Kings* – is nearly upon us, so it seemed like a good time to find out from Blue Byte producer Benedikt Grindel how the developer comes up with concepts that will keep *Settlers* fans happy while enticing newcomers.

"We are inspired by many things – movies, comic books, books in general," Grindel explains. "Once we had chosen the Middle Ages as the new *Settlers* scenario, our graphic artists and game designers watched all the medieval-themed movies we could find." But the research process wasn't just a case of having a *Monty Python And The Holy Grail* all-nighter. Blue Byte had to consider its various audiences, and as a European developer was perhaps in a better position to do so. "There are cultural differences between the European countries that have got to be considered," Grindel says. "In France comic books are a well-accepted part of the culture, whereas in Germany they are not. It's not surprising that the gaming preferences are also different. If you choose to make games that are successful in many countries, it is important to try to develop games that appeal to many."

Despite working so hard to tailor the game to different audiences, it must have been worrying for Blue Byte to have been developing a PC RTS title at a time when PC games sales were down and interest in the strategy genre seemed to be waning. Things appear to be looking up now, but how do PC developers feel about the next generation of consoles that could pose a threat to polygon-chomping PCs?

"When new consoles are entering the market, the natural advantage of the PC – constant improvement of hardware with faster CPUs, better graphics cards and so on – is not really there," says Grindel. "As consoles grow older, this advantage of the PC is getting more and more relevant again – a top-notch PC game today looks a lot better than a console game. At the same time, PC games are getting better. They have learned from console games and they now provide easier accessibility, stronger rewards for the player, and short-term fun – and there's still room for improvement. Many PC games are still difficult to install, have too many bugs and are hard to learn. We still have a long way to go, but PC games will always be an important part of interactive gaming."

Perhaps as an attempt to revive interest in the RTS genre, the latest *Settlers* title has dropped the cute style that suited the previous games so well in favour of a mature, realistic look. A few other series have undergone similar changes recently, so what was Blue Byte's reason for abandoning the cartoony look? "Our goal with *The Settlers: Heritage Of Kings* was clearly not to revolutionise the genre as a whole," Grindel explains. "Yes, we have done some new things – and especially for the *Settlers* series – but we have not reinvented the wheel. The choice concerning the visuals was the result of an evolutionary process. We have tested all kinds of different designs in 3D. The cutesy visuals just didn't work. The moment when we saw the first characters in the new, more realistic look was eye-opening. From that day on, the graphics were always perceived as one of the strongest points of the game. Some people still missed the old look, but they liked the new look as well."

But tweaking visuals and adding realism to games may not be enough. RTSs are still struggling to break into the mainstream of gaming; third-person adventures and FPSs are becoming increasingly popular while resource management is often considered dull, and Grindel knows why. "RTS games are typically slower than other games," he comments. "They don't offer the fast-paced, action-oriented fun that seems to be the choice of the day." But he has an idea about what needs to be done, and remains optimistic. "I think RTS games have to become more 'rock 'n' roll' in their presentation; they have to become stronger emotionally. The genre needs to change further in order to survive, and I am sure it will."

The Settlers: Heritage Of Kings is out on 18 February on PC and is previewed on page 54





BENEDIKT GRINDEL – MILD-MANNERED PRODUCER OR OVERLORD OF THOUSANDS OF LITTLE DIGITAL PEOPLE? WELL, BOTH ACTUALLY. WE DRAGGED HIM AWAY FROM HIS RTS FANTASIES TO FIND OUT WHAT THE GENRE NEEDS TO DO TO CONQUER THE WORLD…



COMMUNITY

EVERY ISSUE, **games™** VISITS A DIFFERENT DEVELOPER. THIS MONTH WE'RE CANADA-BOUND TO MEET UBISOFT MONTREAL

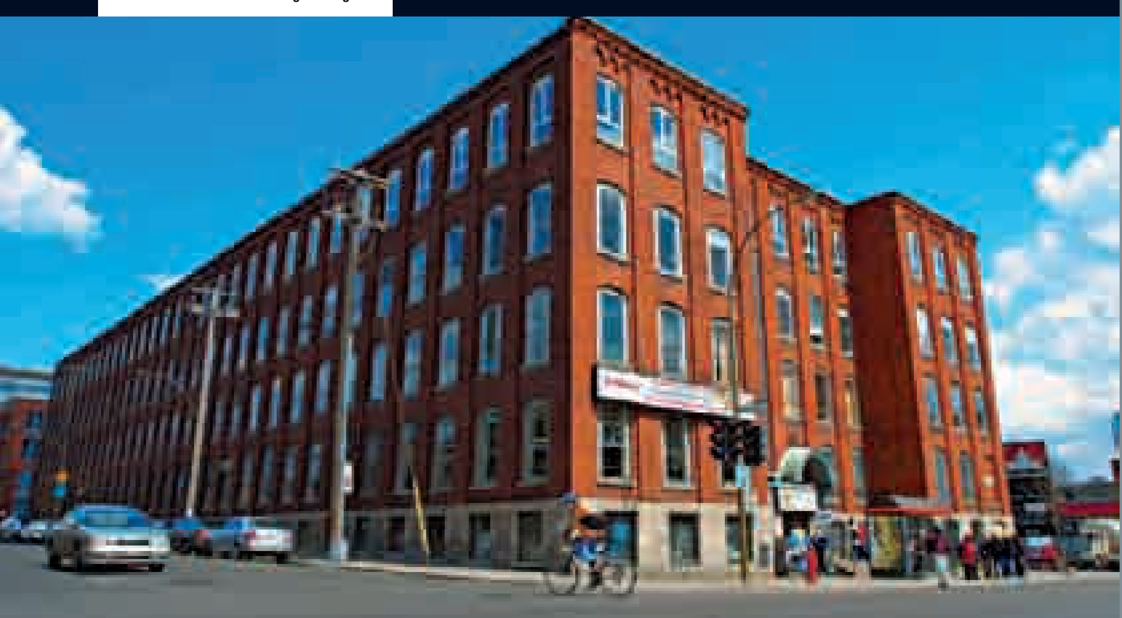
UBISOFT MONTREAL

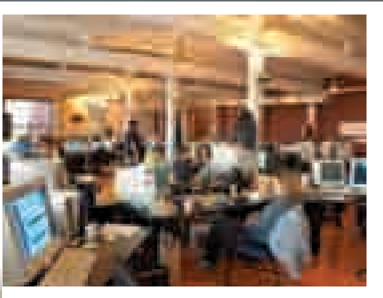
FROM TINY FRENCH ACORNS, GIANT GLOBAL OAKS GROW… SUCH HAS BEEN THE METEORIC GROWTH OF THE UBISOFT EMPIRE THAT IT NOW CONTROLS ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST DEVELOPMENT STUDIOS, SECOND ONLY TO EA. GAMES™ VENTURED TO THE ICY HEIGHTS OF CANADA TO HAVE A POKE AROUND UBISOFT MONTREAL'S STUDIO…

Behold, the most unprepossessing studio ever created – a building that, going on its rather shabby exterior, isn't the kind of place you'd expect to find the world's second largest games developer. But then, the deceptive look of the building is rather fitting considering the company inside; after all, if you'd have told us ten years ago that Ubisoft would become one of the most successful publisher/developers around, we'd have laughed in your face and made you play *Tonic Trouble*. Yet here we are in the swirling winter snows of Montreal, eagerly awaiting the chance to see what delights are inside…

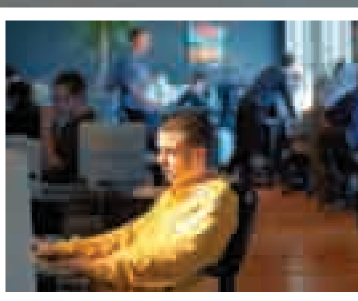
While some of its projects are secret, it's impossible for Ubisoft to hide the sheer scale

From the outside you'd never guess that the world's second-biggest development studio is contained within this unassuming building…







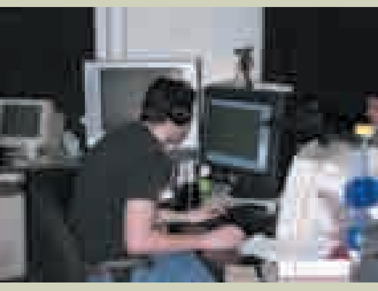


of its Montreal operation – there are scores of people packed into each of the studio's open-plan areas, although it's far from the battery farm you might expect from such a large developer. In fact, it could even be described as homely. Even so, there are massive differences between smaller, more close-knit developers and something as massive as Ubisoft Montreal; differences that the staff are more than aware of. "It's a very good thing to work for a small developer because you have to do almost everything," says Stephane Roy, one of *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*'s associate producers. "Here at Montreal, we have great support so if anyone has a question about marketing, networking, something technical or whatever, there is someone they can talk to; that's why the teams can focus on what they do best which is make games, because people around them can deal with the other stuff. A small developer can't give you that, which is why it's an excellent place to start; you can work out which things you excel at, because you get to touch every aspect of development."

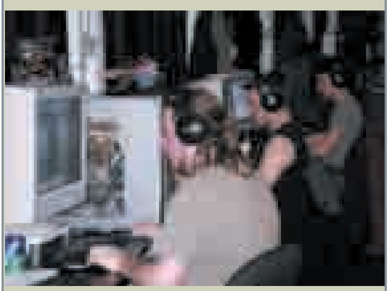
As a man with experience in such smaller environments, Roy is more than qualified to highlight the possible disadvantages that any employee faces coming straight into such a well-structured, almost regimented company. Despite this, he harbours no illusions about what's to come for the games industry. "In the future, with the next generation of consoles, I'd prefer to work for a larger company because of the opportunities they will offer," he continues. "Smaller companies will have a lot of difficulties because the cost of development and research is just going to get higher, particularly on the high-profile titles; it certainly won't be impossible for them to create amazing titles, but it will be difficult. With a company like Ubisoft, we have a bit more freedom to experiment with creativity, which can only be a good thing."

> "FINDING THE **BALANCE BETWEEN REALISM AND FUN** ISN'T **MAGIC** – YOU REALLY HAVE **TO TRY LOTS OF DIFFERENT THINGS** BEFORE IT WORKS"
>
> PIERRE RIVEST, UBISOFT MONTREAL

Bigger teams might mean more minds to bounce ideas off, but it can also create great divides among the people who should ideally be working together as closely as possible. Such is the problem of working within a developer the size of Ubisoft Montreal, although it's one of the key factors that comes to light when the studio looks to begin any new project. "Communication



Hard at work – just like everyone else here.



THE BIGGER THEY ARE…

The growth of the games industry may well be a good thing, but there's more than enough proof that being a big corporate developer can have a negative effect on the quality of your products – you only have to look at some of EA's titles to see that. It's when upper management starts getting involved that mistakes are inevitably made, but the people who prefer to look at market trends and profit margins rather than gameplay are part and parcel of any big developer. Thankfully, the corporate side of Ubisoft doesn't encroach on the creative talent of the teams as much as you might expect with a company of such size. "We get a lot of creativity," insists Pierre Rivest. "If some higher marketing guy says that they want to do one thing but then you come up with a better idea, he's obviously going to suggest that you should go with your idea instead. It's all a matter of managing creativity and outside input and finding the best combination of the two."





SHARE OPTIONS

One benefit of having so many development teams under one roof is the ability to co-operate, which has paid off for the studio on more than one occasion. *Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time*, for example, owes some of its quality to the *Beyond Good & Evil* team, who helped implement parts of their Jade engine to enhance the Prince's acrobatics. The same goes for Ubisoft's Tom Clancy franchises, *Splinter Cell* and *Rainbow Six*, despite the huge difference in style. "*Splinter Cell* is third-person with a focus on the main character, while *Rainbow Six* gives you much more precision through the first-person viewpoint," says Pierre Rivest. "That said, the games use the same engine, so the teams have spoken to each other about various things in order to share information and get the best results."

MAPLE-LEAF MEN

1 STEPHANE ROY
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

IN A NUTSHELL: Roy has worked at Ubisoft Montreal for over a year after being brought in specifically to head up the development of *Chaos Theory*'s Co-op mode. He's been in the games industry for six years, holding positions at various development companies including DC Studios.

2 PIERRE RIVEST
LEAD GAME DESIGNER

IN A NUTSHELL: Rivest has been part of Ubisoft Montreal for seven years, moving up through the ranks by working on several titles for the studio – everything from *Uru* (Ubisoft's online *Myst* title) and *Batman: Vengeance* to various Playmobil games.

is always key in a structure like ours," says Pierre Rivest, the lead game designer on *Chaos Theory*'s single-player adventure. "The bigger your teams are, the more difficult communicating gets, there's no question about that. Of course, we have to plan ahead during the pre-development stage to work out how many people are going to be needed by the end of the project, then take necessary steps to make sure that everyone is in touch with the people they need, right through to the last guy in the chain. It is quite a challenge but with proper planning it's not impossible, although it's certainly easier the smaller your teams get."

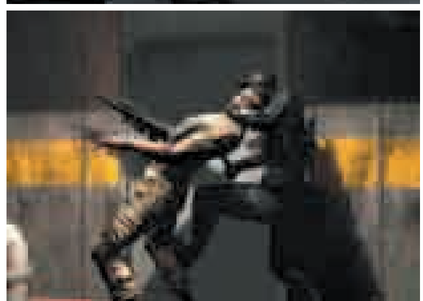
With the Montreal studio spread throughout a sprawling maze of offices, it shouldn't be surprising that communication isn't the only factor that presents a challenge, especially since in the case of *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, the teams aren't exactly small. With the plan being to have all three versions of the game (PC, Xbox and PS2) completed for a simultaneous launch, the gauntlet hit the floor with a resounding thud. As such, the studio stepped away from the previous approach of finishing one version before moving people around, to having three unique teams all working independently; an effort that has not only brought hundreds of people together, but also resulted in some of Ubisoft's most accomplished work to date.

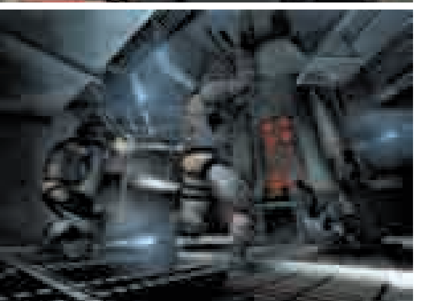
"THE **NEXT STEP** FOR VIDEOGAMES SHOULD **BE ABOUT FEELING**; IF YOUR CHARACTER DIES, **YOU SHOULD CRY**"
STEPHANE ROY, UBISOFT MONTREAL

Virtually all of Ubisoft's biggest franchises have come out of the Montreal studio – and yet it's only one third of the company's empire.

02







"**I'M LOOKING FORWARD** TO WORKING ON A **GOOD STORY** IN THE FUTURE, NOT JUST **THE TECHNOLOGY**"

STEPHANE ROY, UBISOFT MONTREAL

The trick, it would appear, is all in the pre-production – a process that Ubisoft Montreal considers very important. Months and even years can go into the planning of a game before the first piece of code is written, although it does vary. "It depends on the time frame of the project, as having either one or two years to work on something makes a big difference," admits Rivest. "After that, it's a question of sitting down with the right people, the ones that you know you're going to be able to make a good game with, and brainstorming and seeing what's good or not… It also depends on our mandate; we have the heads of the studio telling us what they have in mind, what they think is going to be the trend in the next year, what the competition is doing and so on, so it's a matter of balancing all these things in order to do our best."

Of course, while Ubisoft's big expectations now lie with the next generation of technology, it's refreshing to hear that Ubisoft Montreal's creatives are more interested in pushing the boundaries of entertainment rather than just graphical excellence. The continuation of the company's many franchises depends on the development of believable scenarios and dangers – exactly the kind of things that many of us already enjoy in films. In fact, if Ubisoft's attitudes are to be believed, the gap between games and more traditional forms of entertainment is growing smaller by the day. "If you watched people play games several years ago it was pretty boring – lots of jumping and eating mushrooms and the like – but now, I can watch one of our testers playing the game, read the text, listen to the voices and I'll have a good time even though I'm not playing because of the quality of the cinematics," insists Roy. "I'm looking forward to working on a good story in the future, not just the technology; new consoles will obviously be very powerful and the programmers will no doubt be very happy with that. From the artistic and creative point of view, though, it will be more about what it will be possible to do with the story and how we can create memorable moments that will stay with gamers forever, just as movies like *The Terminator* or *Kill Bill* have sequences that stand out in the minds of the viewers."

Do these bold claims mean that Ubisoft Montreal is the gaming equivalent of James Cameron or Quentin Tarantino? The pedigree seems to say so, and the future's looking pretty bright too.

A SERIES OF FORTUNATE EVENTS

Since being established, Ubisoft's Montreal studio has taken control of some of the company's biggest franchises and develops a large chunk of its key releases for the year. If you've played any of these games, you owe it to the Canadians…

SPLINTER CELL [MULTI]

We can still recall the first time that Ubisoft demonstrated the original *Splinter Cell* game to us, if only because it took a fair while for us to pick our jaws off the floor. Since then, the package has only grown stronger with the addition of new gadgets and visual effects, and a hugely playable multiplayer mode.



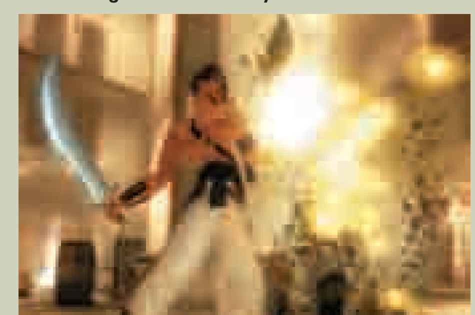
RAINBOW SIX [MULTI]

Although Red Storm's tactical squad title dates back several years, the game's evolution from in-depth strategy adventure to first-person shooter in *Rainbow Six 3* has opened the game up to a whole new audience. The current instalment, *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*, is being co-developed by Ubisoft Montreal and the Red Storm team.



PRINCE OF PERSIA [MULTI]

Helping us to forget the hideousness of *Prince Of Persia 3D*, Ubisoft's take on Jordan Mechner's acclaimed Arabian adventure reminded us how great action platform titles should play – the elegance of *Sands Of Time* has to be experienced. The sequel, *Warrior Within*, has divided critics, although we stand firm by our score of nine.



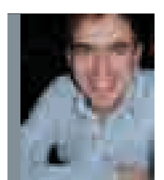
FROM THE FRONT

MICROSOFT THROWS IN THE TOWEL OVER SPORTS GAME DEVELOPMENT, WHILE ELIXIR GETS A BOOST



THE PEOPLE IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY TELL IT LIKE IT IS…

ACROSS THE FROZEN POND



Whether you work on a videogames magazine in the UK, US or, in my case, Finland, one thing remains the same – each month you have to do your best to provide the kind of content your readers want.

The substantially smaller market size of Finland has implications on the production of a magazine. There's less ad revenue and fewer readers, which translates into fewer pages than, say, French and UK games magazines and, of course, fewer staff. This makes creating the best content a bit more challenging, but creating the best content isn't down to money – it's down to hard work and a love for the job.

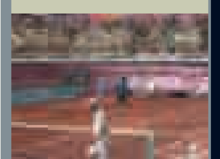
Since not all games publishers have proper representation in Finland, getting your hands on the latest preview code or going on the swanky press trips my UK colleagues attend isn't an automatic thing. Sometimes, getting assets and interviews is far more difficult for us than our UK colleagues; don't tell me there's no review code when **games™** has already reviewed it, Mr PR man!

Then again, here you aren't competing against ten other magazines as you are in the UK, nor do you have the same kind of market pressure. At the end of the day, the challenge of providing the best content is a fun one.

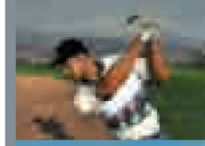
Of course, each country has its specific tastes and it's the same with games. A perfect example is ice hockey; since it's the biggest and most supported sport in Finland, EA's NHL games sell by the bucketload here every year. *Every* year.

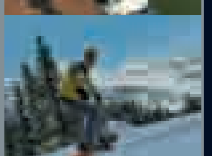
It means we do quite a bit of coverage on hockey games, which you don't see so much of in UK games magazines. Of course, the flipside is that we have zero pages covering rugby and cricket games… go figure.

THOMAS PUHA, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF/CEO, PELAAJA MAGAZINE



Looks like it's EA all the way for Xbox sports fans.





MICROSOFT GIVES UP ON ITS SPORTS GAME AMBITIONS

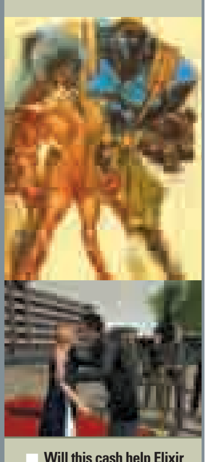
EARLY BATH

The sale of a 70-strong development studio has marked the end of Microsoft Game Studio's plans to create sports games for the Xbox. Indie Built, based in Utah, has been sold for an undisclosed sum to Take 2 Interactive.

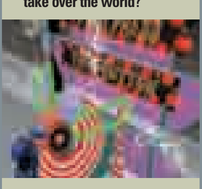
Microsoft had already put its *XSN Sports* titles on hold for a year, but the redundancies in August 2004 of the teams behind *Inside Drive* and *NFL Fever* further confirmed the company's intentions to put a halt to internally produced sports games. With the sale of Indie Built, Microsoft has lost the last of its sports development teams.

However, some have argued that with Electronic Arts now fully committed to supporting Xbox Live with its hugely successful EA Sports range, Microsoft no longer needs its own sports studios. You have to wonder whether this was part of the plan when EA got involved with Xbox Live when *Burnout 3* was released back in September. Whatever the case, with EA Sports' support Microsoft undoubtedly feels that it has this genre well covered and is sure to have many sports titles available for both its current- and next-generation consoles.

As for Indie Built, its acquisition marks a further move into the sports market for Take 2, which has also signed a deal giving it publishing rights for Sega's *ESPN* series. However, Take 2's sports output will undoubtedly suffer as a result of EA's recent signing of a five-year licence to produce NFL games. American football titles can be



Will this cash help Elixir take over the world?



ELIXIR OF WEALTH

BRITISH STUDIO RECEIVES NEW FUNDING BUT SUFFERS STAFF CUTS

Elixir Studios has announced that it has secured another round of funding. The London-based developer has reportedly raised £1 million, although to sour the good news it's also been announced that several redundancies are expected in the coming months. Up to 15 staff could be out of work after a reshuffle.

The funding for the company – which is responsible for PC titles *Evil Genius* and *Republic: The Revolution* – has been raised entirely by existing investors and is planned to be put to use on the firm's current projects – including the much-anticipated sequel to *Evil Genius*, which seems likely to include the multiplayer options that the first game was missing.

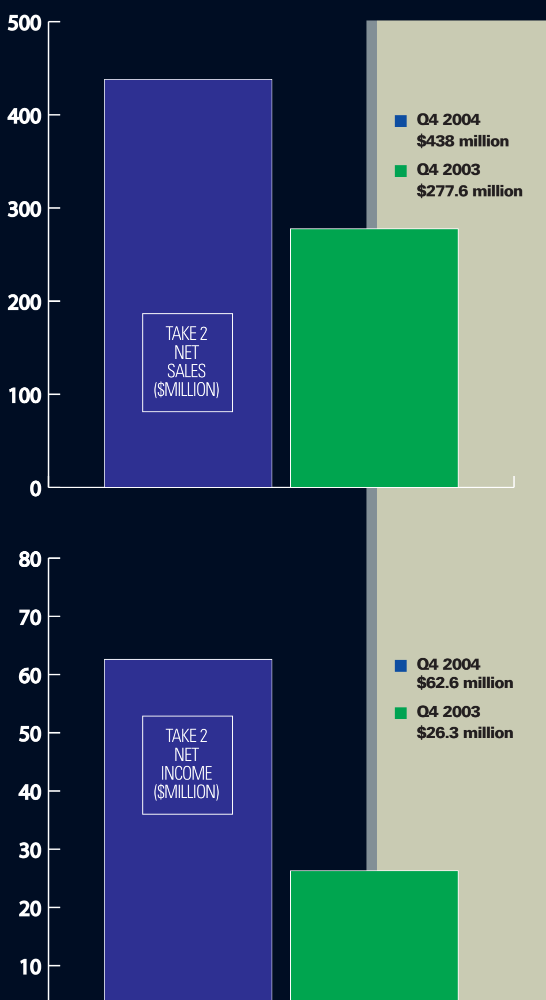
As well as these game projects, Elixir is working on a new title for a US publisher which was agreed almost two years ago and is expected to be ready for release sometime in 2006. Elixir is also currently developing a prototype for a next-generation console IP.



> "SOME HAVE ARGUED THAT WITH **EA SUPPORTING XBOX LIVE** WITH ITS SPORTS TITLES, MICROSOFT **NO LONGER NEEDS** ITS OWN DEDICATED SPORTS STUDIOS"

extremely lucrative, so Take 2 is understandably put out by the agreement. In a statement, the company said that the exclusive licence is a "tremendous disservice to the consumers and sports fans whose funds ultimately support the NFL, by limiting their choices, curbing creativity and almost certainly leading to higher game prices."

Despite the sale, it's thought that Indie Built is currently looking towards next-generation development, and after the Take 2 acquisition it's likely to start looking towards developing for consoles other than the Xbox, to which it was previously tied.



IT'S NECK AND NECK IN THE HANDHELD RACE

SIX OF ONE...

Nintendo may have sold 1 million units of its DS handheld in both the US and Japan, but its happy announcement was tempered by the news that Sony managed to shift its entire allocation of PSPs in Japan – some 200,000 machines – in just one day. Although the DS had a head start over the PSP, within four days of its 2 December launch the PSP had matched Nintendo's sales figures. Over half a million DSs were sold in the US after the machine's launch two weeks before the PSP, causing stock shortages after 90 per cent of the stock allocation was sold immediately.

The runaway success of the two machines is good news for both companies, though rather more worrying for Nintendo as it will now have to fight harder to hold onto its handheld-console crown.

Both systems are due to launch in the UK at the end of March, although dates are not specific. However, many retailers are already accepting pre-orders for the new hardware.

PSP, DS, daddy or chips – the hardest choice there is.

UK MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

	Title	Publisher	Format
1	Need For Speed Underground 2	EA Games	Multi
2	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar	PS2
3	Prince Of Persia: Warrior Within	Ubisoft	Multi
4	FIFA 2005	EA Sports	Multi
5	The Incredibles	THQ	Multi
6	Lord Of The Rings: The Third Age	EA Games	Multi
7	Call Of Duty: Finest Hour	Activision	Multi
8	Pro Evolution Soccer 4	Konami	Multi
9	The Urbz: Sims In The City	EA Games	Multi
10	GoldenEye: Rogue Agent	EA Games	Multi

Only a few shockers as we move into 2005 – specifically, the disappearance of *Halo 2* from the top ten (dropping all the way down to 24) and the fact that, despite plenty of warning, some idiots still fell for *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent*. Oh, the agony…

All information is compiled by ChartTrack and is the strict copyright of Elspa (UK) Ltd. UK Entertainment Software Sales Charts (Full Price, All Formats) (w/e 1 January 2005)



NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN

CALM YOUR FEVERISH ANTICIPATION WITH OUR COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF FORTHCOMING RELEASES

RELEASE LISTS



Kessen III PS2 Rejoice – a Koei game without '*Dynasty*' in the title.

KOTOR II: The Sith Lords Multi Can Obsidian's debut capture the magic of the movies?

Settlers: Heritage Of Kings: PC Rebranded, reinvented and returning on page 54.

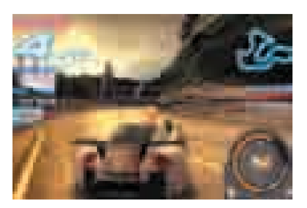


MOST PLAYED

RIDGE RACERS

Format: PSP
Publisher: Namco

With gaming forums so quick to fill with bitching about battery life, loading times and disc noise, we're glad that Namco has seen fit to deliver a PSP game so enjoyable that all such frivolous worries pale into insignificance. Silly drifting and *Burnout*-style boosts make for some superb high-speed races.



SAWARU! MADE IN WARIO

Format: DS
Publisher: Nintendo

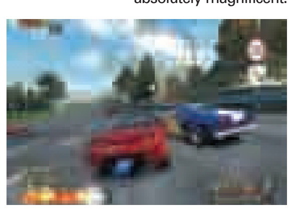
It's not every day you get to bounce a little potato chap a few miles into space, blow a dandelion seed across an ocean or draw routes for skiers to follow – *Wario Ware* on the DS is every bit as ridiculous, quirky and entertaining as its predecessors.



BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

Format: Xbox
Publisher: Electronic Arts

Yes, it's the new-year lull, and when everyone's started tiring of Master Chief's online antics and you couldn't possibly unload another bullet on Live, what better way to while away a cold and murky evening than to smash the hell out of horribly fast cars? Criterion's latest is still absolutely magnificent.



PLAYSTATION2

Month	Title	Publisher	
FEBRUARY '05			
04 February	Sonic Mega Collection Plus	Sega	
04 February	Phantom Brave	Koei	Wanted
11 February	Neighbours From Hell	JoWood	
11 February	Playboy: The Mansion	Ubisoft	
11 February	Constantine	SCi	
11 February	Mega Man X8	Capcom	
18 February	Mercenaries	Activision	
18 February	Shadow Of Rome	Capcom	
25 February	Samurai Warriors: Xtreme Legends	Koei	
25 February	Brothers In Arms	Ubisoft	Wanted
25 February	Stolen	Hip Interactive	
TBC	The Punisher	THQ	
TBC	Capcom Fighting Jam	Capcom	
TBC	Altered Beast	Sega	
TBC	EyeToy: Kinetic	Sony	
TBC	Phantom Crash 2050	Konami	
TBC	Ace Combat 5	Sony	
MARCH '05			
11 March	CT Special Forces: Fire For Effect	Hip Interactive	
25 March	Devil May Cry 3	Capcom	Wanted
25 March	Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	Wanted
TBC	Astro Boy	Sega	
TBC	Guilty Gear Isuka	Sega	
Q1 '05			
TBC	Shadow Of Rome	Capcom	
TBC	Destroy All Humans!	THQ	Wanted
TBC	La Pucelle	Koei	
TBC	Kessen III	Koei	Wanted
TBC	King Of Fighters: Maximum Impact	Ignition	
TBC	Shadow Hearts: Covenant	Midway	
TBC	Everybody's Golf 4	Sony	
TBC	MotoGP 4	Sony	
TBC	Cold Winter	Vivendi	
TBC	The Punisher	THQ	
TBC	SOCOM 3	Sony	
TBC	Kingdom Hearts II	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Okami	Capcom	Wanted
TBC	Resident Evil Outbreak: File 2	Capcom	
TBC	The Nightmare Before Christmas	Capcom	
TBC	Tak 2: The Staff Of Dreams	THQ	
TBC	Far Cry Instincts	Ubisoft	Wanted
TBC	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	Konami	Wanted
TBC	Death By Degrees	Sony	
TBC	Sniper Elite	TBC	Wanted
TBC	Lego Star Wars	Eidos	
TBC	Nanobreaker	Konami	
TBC	Rumble Roses	Konami	
TBC	NARC	Midway	
TBC	Super Monkey Ball Deluxe	Sega	
TBC	Viewtiful Joe 2	Capcom	Wanted
TBC	Neo Contra	Konami	
TBC	Monster Hunter	Capcom	Wanted



GAMECUBE

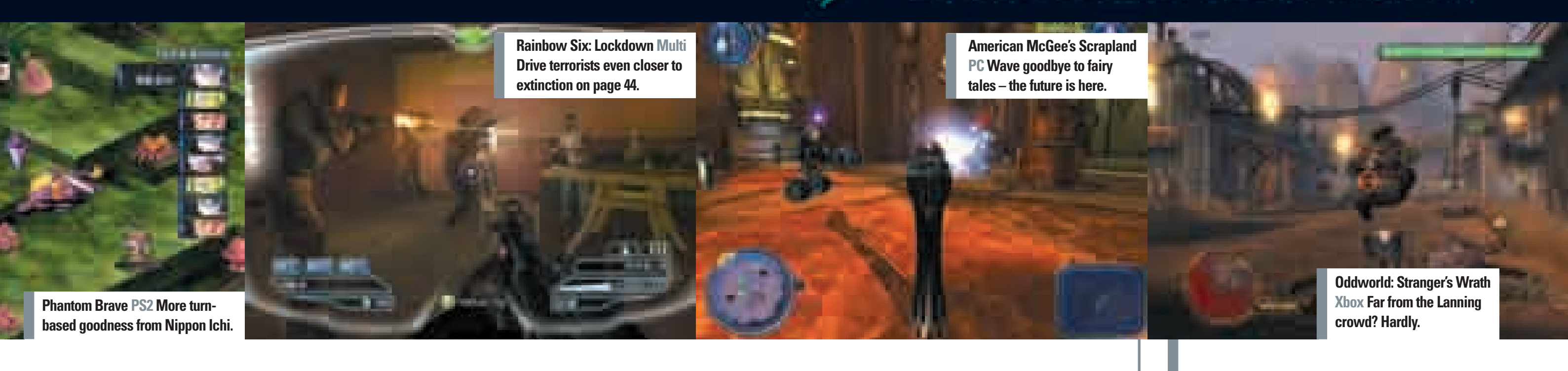
Month	Title	Publisher	
FEBRUARY '05			
04 February	Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat	Nintendo	Wanted
11 February	Neighbours From Hell	JoWood	
25 February	Mario Power Tennis	Nintendo	
MARCH '05			
11 March	Mario Party 6	Nintendo	
18 March	Resident Evil 4	Capcom	Wanted
Q1 '05			
TBC	Advance Wars: Under Fire	Nintendo	
TBC	Tak 2: The Staff Of Dreams	THQ	
TBC	Viewtiful Joe 2	Capcom	Wanted
TBC	Nintendo Puzzle Collection	Nintendo	
TBC	Star Fox	Nintendo	
TBC	Odama	Nintendo	
TBC	Scaler	Global Star	
TBC	Area 51	Midway	
TBC	Killer7	Capcom	Wanted



XBOX

Month	Title	Publisher	
FEBRUARY '05			
11 February	Neighbours From Hell	JoWood	
11 February	Playboy: The Mansion	Ubisoft	
11 February	Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic II: The Sith Lords	Activision	Wanted
18 February	Mercenaries	Activision	
25 February	Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict	Midway	
25 February	Brothers In Arms	Ubisoft	
TBC	The Punisher	THQ	
TBC	Constantine	SCi	
TBC	Forza Motorsport	Microsoft	Wanted
TBC	Capcom Fighting Jam	Capcom	
MARCH '05			
25 March	Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	Wanted
TBC	Otogi 2	Sega	
Q1 '05			
TBC	Doom 3	Activision	Wanted
TBC	Dead Or Alive Ultimate	Microsoft	Wanted

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Phantom Brave PS2 More turn-based goodness from Nippon Ichi.

Rainbow Six: Lockdown Multi Drive terrorists even closer to extinction on page 44.

American McGee's Scrapland PC Wave goodbye to fairy tales – the future is here.

Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath Xbox Far from the Lanning crowd? Hardly.

TBC	Pariah	Hip Interactive	Wanted
TBC	Sniper Elite	TBC	Wanted
TBC	Star Wars: Republic Commando	Activision	Wanted
TBC	Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath	Electronic Arts	Wanted
TBC	NARC	Midway	
TBC	Operation Flashpoint	Codemasters	Wanted
TBC	Far Cry Instincts	Ubisoft	Wanted
TBC	CT Special Forces: Fire For Effect	Hip Interactive	
TBC	Half-Life 2	Vivendi	Wanted
TBC	Destroy All Humans!	THQ	
TBC	Super Monkey Ball Deluxe	Sega	
TBC	Lego Star Wars	Eidos	
TBC	Area 51	Midway	
TBC	Conker: Live And Reloaded	Microsoft	Wanted
TBC	Kameo: Elements Of Power	Microsoft	
TBC	Sid Meier's Pirates!	Atari	Wanted
TBC	Tak 2: The Staff Of Dreams	THQ	
TBC	Jade Empire	Microsoft	



PC

Month	Title	Publisher	
FEBRUARY '05			
04 February	City Of Heroes	NC Soft	
04 February	Creature Conflict: The Clan Wars	Cenega	
04 February	Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy	Midway	Wanted
11 February	Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic II: The Sith Lords	Activision	Wanted
11 February	Playboy: The Mansion	Ubisoft	
18 February	X2: The Return	Deep Silver	
25 February	Brothers In Arms	Ubisoft	Wanted
25 February	Stolen	Hip Interactive	
TBC	Immortal Cities: Children Of The Nile	Sega	
TBC	Second Sight	Codemasters	
MARCH '05			
04 March	Star Wars: Republic Commando	Activision	Wanted
11 March	CT Special Forces: Fire For Effect	Hip Interactive	
Q1 '05			
TBC	Duke Nukem Forever	Vivendi	
TBC	Bet On Soldier	Digital Jesters	Wanted
TBC	The Matrix Online	Warner Bros	Wanted
TBC	Settlers: Heritage Of Kings	Ubisoft	
TBC	Sniper Elite	TBC	Wanted
TBC	UFO: Aftershock	Cenega	
TBC	Pariah	Hip Interactive	
TBC	Lego Star Wars	Eidos	
TBC	Black & White 2	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	Wanted
TBC	Battlefield 2	Electronic Arts	Wanted
TBC	Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	Wanted
TBC	S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl	THQ	Wanted

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Month	Title	Publisher	
FEBRUARY '05			
18 February	Advance Guardian Heroes	Sega	
TBC	It's Mr Pants	THQ	
TBC	Banjo Pilot	THQ	
TBC	Kingdom Hearts: Chain Of Memories	Buena Vista	Wanted
MARCH '05			
TBC	Mario Party Advance	Nintendo	
TBC	Yu-Gi-Oh! World Championship 2005	Konami	
Q1 '05			
TBC	Boktai 2: Solar Boy Django	Konami	
TBC	Pokémon Emerald	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	F-Zero Climax	Nintendo	
TBC	Wario Ware: Twisted!	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Elf: The Movie	TBC	
TBC	Lego Star Wars	Eidos	
TBC	Batman Begins	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Metal Slug Advance	Ignition	Wanted
TBC	Donkey Kong: King Of Swing	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Tak 2: The Staff Of Dreams	THQ	

PLAYSTATION PORTABLE

Month	Title	Publisher	
MARCH '05			
25 March	PlayStation Portable Hardware	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Ridge Racers	Namco	Wanted
TBC	Darkstalkers Chronicles	Capcom	Wanted
TBC	Armored Core: Formula Front	TBC	
TBC	Dynasty Warriors	Koei	
TBC	Hot Shots Golf	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Tony Hawk's Underground 2	Activision	
Q1 '05			
TBC	Metal Gear Ac!d	Konami	Wanted
TBC	Ape Escape	Sony	Wanted
TBC	NBA Street	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Wipeout Pure	Sony	Wanted
TBC	Gran Turismo 4 Mobile	Sony	Wanted

NINTENDO DS

Month	Title	Publisher	
MARCH '05			
25 March	Nintendo DS Hardware	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Super Mario 64 DS	Nintendo	
TBC	Asphalt: Urban GT	TBC	
TBC	Feel The Magic: XY/XX	Sega	Wanted
TBC	Mario Kart DS	Nintendo	
TBC	The Urbz: Sims In The City	Electronic Arts	
TBC	Ridge Racer DS	Namco	
Q1 '05			
TBC	Wario Ware: Touched!	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Animal Crossing	Nintendo	Wanted
TBC	Mr Driller: Drill Spirits	TBC	Wanted
TBC	Spider-Man 2	Activision	

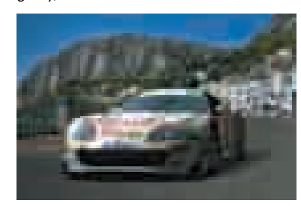
PLEASE NOTE: While every effort has been made to ensure these dates are correct at the time of going to press, they are liable to change at short notice. Which is completely beyond our control, so don't go giving us evils.

gamesTM ON THE HORIZON

GRAN TURISMO 4 MOBILE

Format: PSP
Publisher: Sony

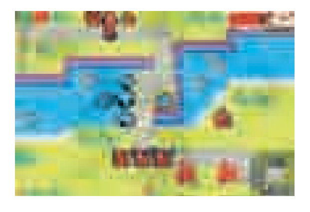
With Sony's wonder handheld now just around the corner in the UK, it's something of a shame that the game that promises to truly show off the hardware is still a couple of laps behind. Still, if early reports and images are anything to go by, it'll be well worth the wait.



ADVANCE WARS DS

Format: DS
Publisher: Nintendo

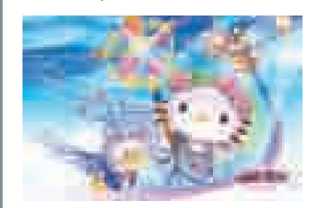
Since Kuju appears to have stolen all our hopes and dreams for the Cube version and chained them to its radiator, all our cutesy war needs return to Nintendo and the DS. Two screens means twice as good, right? We're certainly hoping so…



HELLO KITTY WORLD

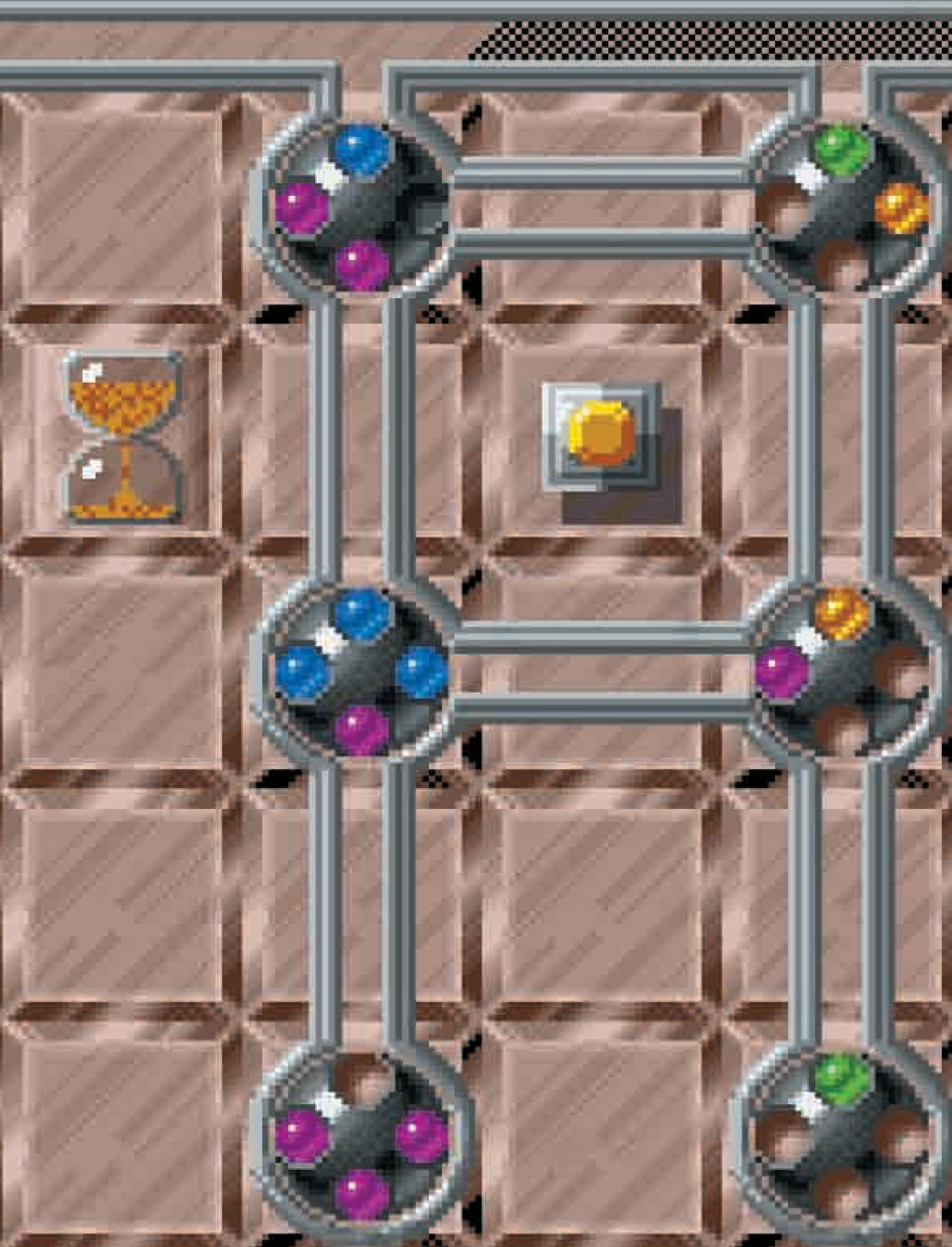
Format: PC
Publisher: TBC

Fed up with wandering the world slaying spiders and goblins? Tired of dressing up like an extra from *Knightmare* and spending hours looking for quests? Then Sanrio might just have the thing for you. If, that is, you don't mind the colour pink. Massively multiplayer fun and puzzles for all the family.





This one's for all the marbles **Logical – Amiga [Rainbow Arts] 1991**




eMag



"THERE'S A LOT OF SOURCE MATERIAL DESCRIBING THE BLISSFULLY IGNORANT STATE OF FIFTIES AMERICAN LIFE"

GORDON MOYES, PRODUCER, PANDEMIC

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE THIRD-PERSON KIND

DESTROY ALL HUMANS!

PS2 **It seems every other title currently in development that enables ten paces' walking without railroading the gamer is hurriedly expanding its horizons just enough to justify a '*GTA* meets…' tag on its press release.** So you'd be forgiven for thinking that the description '*GTA* meets Fifties B-movie' is nothing but a dire stretch of the simile. After all, as gamers it's important to protect ourselves from weak games masquerading as something more innovative, lest we become inundated with sequels and clones of the mediocre fodder we ought to have avoided in the first place. However, with *Destroy All Humans!* Pandemic seems certain to buck the trend, having created a truly original adventure with enough inherent gaming freedom to warrant this extravagant epithet. Not that even such a lofty comparison can do justice to the scope of this third-person assault on simple human life: Pandemic's title can't be pigeonholed in any of gaming's many sub-genres, as *Destroy All Humans!* producer Gordon Moyes is keen to point out. "In many ways, *Destroy All Humans!* defies the usual genre classifications," he asserts, aware that a title that can't be easily categorised immediately becomes a tougher sell. "I'd almost put it in the 'playable humour' genre. There are the exploration and sandbox elements usually associated with open-world games, but there's also a substantial amount of third-person shooter action, though in the end the humour in the story defines the experience for me."

The desire to create a genuinely laugh-worthy game (for the right reasons) has certainly been at the fore throughout this title's two-year production; it was even evident from the tongue-in-cheek press release sent out before E3 last May, which eschewed the 'most bestest game ever' approach of most titles in favour of a parodic, *War Of The Worlds*-style public service brief, warning of impending alien attack. It even referred to Pandemic president Josh Resnick as a 'six-time alien abductee', perfectly setting the tone for the Aussie developer's project, a fusion of modern videogame values and just about every alien-related pop-culture cliché from the last 50 years.

"Pandemic has put a lot of thought into making *Destroy All Humans!* the most amazing B-movie-themed experience," muses Moyes when asked about how the team has been inspired to fill its game with geek-sating references to 'Klaatu Barada Nikto', anal probes and men in black. "Sources of influence in alien mythology are too numerous to mention. It's such a rich area to explore. We've definitely tried to capture a generic B-movie feeling – we've actually used footage from *Plan 9 From Outer Space* in the game, and the humour in *Mars Attacks!* was also an inspiration."

It looks like *Destroy All Humans!* cribs from anywhere and everywhere, from the most basic, Pinko-fearing parables from the McCarthy era to more ironic modern fare such as *The X-Files*. If imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, then the team at Pandemic must see its source

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS2, Xbox
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Pandemic
RELEASE: Spring '05
GENRE: Action/Adventure
PLAYERS: 1

HISTORY

Destroy All Humans! **is an original title in every sense, with no famous brand or licence to rely on. Wish it luck.**

CONCEPT

Needing to desperately restock the DNA of its people, the Furon race decides to invade a planet spawned long ago from its own genetic material: Earth.

material as fondly as a child sat silently in front of a black-and-white television made from mahogany-effect plastic.

Beginning in the sort of redneck dustbowl lamented by Bill Hicks as the apparent tourist destination for so many otherworldly visitors, *Destroy All Humans!* sees players take the role of Cryptosporidium 137, an alien clone sent to strengthen his race's crumbling DNA helix by harvesting human brainstems. "The character design of the Furon – the species of which Crypto is a member – is drawing heavily on the classic 'Gray' species in alien mythology," explains Moyes. "These guys have big grey heads, little bodies and large, black eyes. The Grays were bought to the public's attention most famously through the cover of the book *Communion* [sci-fi author Whitley Streiber's attempt to convince the world he was abducted], however, our alien technology is all custom designed – though obviously there is a rich history of science fiction movies to draw inspiration from."

To this end, Crypto is anthropomorphic enough to be considered lunch-box-sticker cute, and comes equipped with all the abilities you'd expect an alien to have if you were to ever meet one at the local tractor pull: telepathy, psychokinesis hypnotism (which can be used on animals as well as people for comedy effect) and a metamorphic camouflage, which enables him to disguise himself as any character in the game. One mission we saw involves mimicking a security forces general and entering a secret briefing to denounce the existence of extraterrestrial life as conspiratorial nonsense circulated by the Reds to weaken the Stars and Stripes.

"The invasion sites are themed on a stereotypical Fifties America," says Moyes. "There's a lot of source material around – advertisements and so on – describing the blissfully ignorant state of Fifties American life." An ode to innocence, then? A great deal of the comedy in *DAH!* also comes from Crypto's ET-level sense of understanding of his environment and its inhabitants; early attempts at mind control and telekinesis involve livestock rather than people, aided by a heavily-implemented Havok engine. The level of freedom Havok has offered Moyes and his team (and therefore the player) has been an obvious highlight throughout development. "It's made so many things possible we never even considered," Moyes explains. "The director, Brad Welch, just loves it when programmers come to him with requests like 'shall I put ragdoll physics on the cow's udders?'."

And though Crypto's psychic abilities are controlled much like those of Midway's *Psi-Ops* (despite the fact that Pandemic's development was well underway before Nick Scryer had exploded his first head), Moyes doesn't seem disappointed at being beaten to the punch. Rather, he is almost buoyed by the fact that gamers ▷

A UNIQUE INTELLECT

It's certainly admirable that THQ should encourage Pandemic to produce an original property with *Destroy All Humans!*, especially since it's clear the team could have taken any number of sci-fi licences and slapped the same unrelated game on the back end, *Fight Club*-style. "We've had fantastic support from THQ's marketing department," confirms Gordon Moyes. "They've been as excited as we have about the product for the duration of development, and this is key to a successful release of an original IP. There are some incredible TV and print ads on the way, backed by a game that people just won't want to put down once they start playing it. We've worked with licensed material in the past, and we'd certainly open to working with licensed material again in the future, but we've really done something different with *Destroy All Humans!*."

"THE GAME BEGINS IN THE SORT OF REDNECK DUSTBOWL THAT SEEMS TO BE A TOURIST HOT SPOT FOR ALIENS"



Your human-harvesting activities are bound to attract a bit of attention.

DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Pandemic has hit a couple of strikes recently with Xbox war sim *Full Spectrum Warrior* (currently making a technologically tentative transition to PS2) and the much-lauded S*tar Wars Battlefront*, which has not only restored faith in the Lucas licence but pulled many otherwise reticent PS2 gamers online.

HISTORY

■ STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT 2004 [Multi]
■ FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR 2004 [Xbox]
■ ARMY MEN: REAL TIME STRATEGY 2002 [PC]



■ You'll get to mingle with plenty of small-town types. And probe them.

"CRYPTO IS ANTHROPOMORPHIC ENOUGH TO BE CONSIDERED CUTE, AND HAS ALL THE ABILITIES YOU'D EXPECT AN ALIEN TO HAVE IF YOU WERE TO EVER MEET ONE AT THE LOCAL TRACTOR PULL"

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

EXTERMINATE! EXTERMINATE!

PSI-OPS ÷ MARS ATTACKS x THE FIFTIES = DESTROY ALL HUMANS!



PUBLISHER PROFILE

■ THQ has never been a company to concentrate on any single genre or fad, a fact illustrated by the contrast between recent titles *The Punisher* and *The Incredibles*. The publisher is also synonymous with WWE wrestling titles.

HISTORY

- WWE: SMACKDOWN! VS RAW 2004 [Multi]
- BIG MUTHA TRUCKERS 2002 [Multi]
- RED FACTION II 2002 [Multi]



■ Hop into Crypto's flying saucer to take down buildings, cows… anything really.

"THIS LOOKS SURE TO AVOID THE 'KITSCH MEANS CRAP' ADAGE THAT HAS PLAGUED SO MUCH RETRO CULTURE"

will have a fair idea of what to expect from Crypto's powers. "It was interesting to see what other games have done in featuring psychic abilities over the last year," he says. "We'd originally thought we'd be releasing *DAH!* to a mass market who hadn't experienced this type of gameplay, so it's great that the public are ready, willing and waiting to use Crypto's mental powers. There's a lot of little things that make the game really fun – like using psychokinesis to pick up a chicken and hurl it into a farmer to disable him."

Of course, with freedom key to *Destroy All Human!*'s success, Pandemic has also thought to include an arsenal of typically zany alien weapons to fall back on when the stealthy blending-in-with-the-humans and levitating-chickens bits go wrong. As well as a jetpack, Crypto carries trinkets like a laser-firing Ion Generator and an all-purpose Zap-O-Matic dematerialisation ray, with the promise of upgrades rewarded for collecting human material.

And if your tastes for destruction lean towards a grander scale, then bigger, Havok-fuelled carnage can also be caused from within the cockpit of Crypto's spaceship, as the destructible environments enable players to lay waste to entire towns in pursuit of world domination. Naturally a retro-classic saucer, Crypto's UFO comes with a set of weapons of its own, including an Abductor Beam that can pick up cars (or, again, cows) and throw them around.

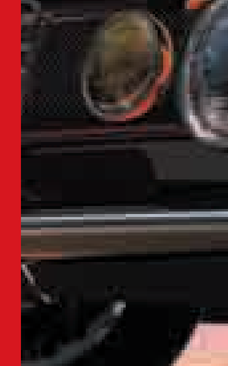
"We've certainly built some impressive weapons," Moyes smiles, "but the UFO's Quantum Deconstructor is my favourite. It's very advanced alien technology, able to level an entire city block in one giant, green explosion."

With so much working in its favour – not least that it's sure to avoid the 'kitsch means crap' adage that has plagued so much retro culture – *Destroy All Humans!* should have little problem finding a niche in a gaming market desperate for a little originality. In fact, Moyes is already confident enough of the game's success to plan ahead ("When you say B-movie and aliens in the same sentence, there are so many things that you can come up with that they can't all possibly make it into the game. You'll have to wait for the sequel…"). Frankly, the most typically unsurprising aspect of Pandemic's effort is that it isn't even remotely like *GTA*, and the comparisons are unnecessary dressing, detracting from the highlights of a game that can stand on the strength of its own merits.

Take it as an unfortunate sign of how volatile the gaming market has become, and how difficult it is to pitch an original IP to a roomful of fearful moneymen who recognise little more than a potential profit. If it weren't for games like *Destroy All Humans!* on the horizon, we might suggest that videogames need to harvest some new DNA too.

WALKING AUTOPSY

Crypto's alien powers are limited by a Concentration meter, which recharges like the psychic powers in Free Radical's *Second Sight*. However, more intelligent characters within the game – such as the identical G-men already aware of the existence of extraterrestrial life – will scrutinise his clever disguises, causing the meter to dwindle as Crypto's concentration falters. An empty bar means that he will be detected, and the fearful agents will levy a host of puny Earth weapons at the hapless traveller. Here is where the inherent freedom of the game engine really begins to take effect: the player must decide whether to hide while the bar recharges enough to take on a different guise, or to pull out one of their own bizarre boomsticks and attempt a full-frontal assault on the residents of this strange planet. Inevitably, both are more difficult than they sound, making blending in through careful stealth the key to successful domination.





ROLE-CALLING OCCUPANTS

While we're used to game characters being voiced by big-name celebrities in order to catch the public eye or warrant a TV commercial during prime time, it's usually left to a host of truly unemployable actors to fill out the lesser roles with all the panache of a six-year-old reading aloud in class. It may come as a surprise, then, that *Destroy All Humans!* is often performed better than the material used to source its jokes. In the build we saw even the placeholder sound effects were good enough to warrant the odd hearty belly laugh; we particularly recommend the way characters will sob after being violated by Crypto's psychic probing. "The humour in the writing, which comes out in the dialogue, is something special," says Gordon Moyes. "I did a lot of the temporary voice-over recording – there were many lines where I had to do anther take because I couldn't stop myself from laughing."



When you see *Rainbow Six: Lockdown* you know why *Black Arrow* was a budget game – it may have been an exciting new title for us, but for the developer it was a mere stopgap. And it only took a few minutes with the latest *Rainbow Six* title to realise that this is no building-block sequel. Changes have been made, improvements are abundant, and there's a new focus for the gameplay, as Ubisoft product manager Louis Lamarche explains: "In *Lockdown* the philosophy is more about the Rainbow team being caught under attack."

Worry not, the Rainbow team haven't been turned into a bunch of amateurs who get caught with their pants around their ankles. As Lamarche clarifies, this new philosophy is about introducing a cinematic feel that drives the game with plot and characters rather than random missions. At one point in the game, for example, two Rainbow members are kidnapped and you get sent in after them.

The 'under attack' idea has also been used to introduce more action-oriented moments to break up the room-to-room clearing that we know and love from

THE ONLY MEN IN BLACK

RAINBOW SIX:



"THE GUT-WRENCHING TENSION, PULSE-POUNDING ACTION, CLOSE-QUARTER BATTLES AND HALLMARK REALISM ARE ABOUT TO GET A WHOLE LOT DARKER"
JOHN PARKES, EMEA MARKETING DIRECTOR, UBISOFT

before. The best example of this is the new sniper set-up. In the previous *Rainbow* games it was up to you if you wanted to take a sniper rifle along with you to perform the odd long-range execution. It forced you to lose a primary weapon and was hardly in keeping with the realistic theme. How many special forces do you know (well, have seen in films) who would take their sniper into battle with them? None, the sniper is supposed to stay out of harm's way and provide cover, which is what you get to do here. At certain sections in a mission you'll swap to a sniper in a building, tower or helicopter to give cover for your comrades. The system works surprisingly well and helps to vary the gameplay while maintaining the pace of the game.

Another technique the developer has used to vary the room clearing is the 'surprise' attack. In certain areas you'll find yourself horribly outgunned and pinned down from all sides. This is a scenario that happened every so often in *Rainbow Six 3* and *Black Arrow*, but it's been used to much greater effect here. Previously, you could learn the mission and position your ▷

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox, PS2, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft/Red Storm Entertainment
RELEASE: March '05
GENRE: First-Person Shooter
PLAYERS: 1-16

CONCEPT

■ The fourth 'proper' *Rainbow Six* game, putting you once again in the shoes of the gruff Special Forces team. But don't let this fool you, *Lockdown* is more than just an update for the series.

HISTORY

■ Since its debut on the PC in 1998, Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six squad has conquered the hearts and minds of gamers.

LOCKDOWN



That mask on the HUD will crack if you take a shot. Get used to it, unless you're *that* good.

men accordingly, but now the game feels random; different tactics are needed and there's a greater sensation of impending doom. There's no doubt about it, this game can get very tough.

It's no wonder Red Storm has decided to introduce a new difficulty selection. Gone are Recruit, Veteran and Elite; now there's Normal, with slight auto aiming and labelled targets, or Professional, which offers no help at all. To make matters even worse, the the enemy AI has been heavily worked over. According to associate producer Deke Waters, "it's a lot more complicated – we wanted to make sure that the AI interacted with each other and reacted with inanimate objects." The computer-controlled characters will also be putting your messy demise pretty high on their 'to do' list. "We also wanted to make sure that the AI would actually clear on you," Waters explains. "They will, for example, stealth open a door and throw in a flash." Scared? You should be.

As you progress through the game you face increasingly harder terrorist cells starting with garden variety and ending on fully organised militia. If they spot you the enemy will group together and hunt you down, use cover fire, move point to point and, yes, they do flashbang rooms – a prospect that will strike the fear of God into you when you see the painfully beautiful new technicolor blur effect that has been created for the flashbang grenade. You'll learn to loathe it as much as you love it, especially since the imprinted ghost image lasts a lot longer now.

It seems as though the developer has spent a long time tweaking every feature of the game while cramming in as many new features as technologically possible. This is certainly true with the visual impact of *Lockdown*; the use of shadow and lighting in particular is fantastic. Where before pretty much all of the light sources in the environment were pre-rendered, now they're real-time. The developer took great pleasure in showing

"I'M A BIG FAN OF IMITATORS BECAUSE THEY HELP TO ADVANCE THE GENRE"
LOUIS LAMARCHE, PRODUCT MANAGER, UBISOFT

THE AIM OF THE GAME

One feature that has quite a big impact on the way the game plays is the addition of an 'iron sight' when you click to zoom. Instead of the whole screen moving in you now get a reticule that attaches itself to the scope on the top of the gun. This is a fantastic feature in itself but it's made even more appealing by the fact that the gun ghosts out around the edges so the bottom half of your view isn't entirely taken up by a huge chunk of metal. If you've ever played *Rainbow Six* online you'll know that this small feature is going to be a life saver.

RAINBOW SIX: LOCKDOWN
XBOX/MULTIFORMAT

DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Since *Black Arrow*, development of *Rainbow Six* has shifted from Red Storm to a joint effort between Red Storm and Ubisoft. This would normally worry us but from the looks of *Lockdown* the expansion of the team hasn't tainted the goods – this is still smothered in Red Storm quality.

HISTORY

■ **GHOST RECON 2** 2004 [Xbox]
■ **RAINBOW SIX 3: BLACK ARROW** 2004 [Xbox]
■ **RAINBOW SIX 3** 2003 [Xbox]



VIDEOGAMES MATHS

THE RAINBOW SERIES GOES ALL HOLLYWOOD

RAINBOW SIX + BRUCKHEIMER - AN ENDING = RAINBOW SIX: LOCKDOWN

■ Every so often the game will explode into action, throwing anything it can at you.

■ Computer-controlled foes are tougher than ever, but friendly AI is smarter too.



PUBLISHER PROFILE

■ Anyone who has a games console has a Ubisoft title. Give or take the odd dud the publisher is fast becoming a beacon of quality in videogaming, particularly in the field of action/adventure or first-person shooting – a quick glance over last year's releases confirms that.

HISTORY

■ **PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN** 2004 [Xbox]
■ **SPLINTER CELL: PANDORA TOMORROW** 2004 [Xbox]
■ **FAR CRY** 2004 [PC]





■ A lot more effort has been put into the weather effects this time round.

this off by throwing a grenade into a room with a light dangling from the ceiling. As soon as the grenade went off the light bounced around casting shadows on the walls and the player. Simple, but it's small features like this that can change the entire atmosphere of the game. Add this to the heat distortion on hot missions, the use of realistic mirrors… it all builds up.

Another stand-out visual feature is the new HUD. As you may have noticed from the screenshots, you play from not only the first-person perspective, but from the view as seen from behind the Rainbow mask. This reflects light from nearby sources and, more importantly, is used to show off environment particle effects. Go outside in the rain and water runs down your mask; you'll see dust build up in desert-themed missions; walk through steam and the glasses fog over; and you can watch frost form in colder climates. Combined with factors like the ever-reliable Ubisoft sound effects you can't really ask for much more in the way of immersion. The mask around the screen will also crack if you're hit especially hard. And as you may have realised by now, this happens quite a lot.

Danger is never far away in *Lockdown* and there are many more opportunities for you to create problems for yourself. The terrorists are a lot smarter now and they react to light or shadow changes, they'll see you in a mirror and they'll also respond to your movements. Clearly, a big new feature for this game is the incorporation of the Havok 2 physics engine. There are a lot of sneakily placed flower pots, vases and other detritus dotted around levels for you to stumble across. Knock something over and it will make a sound; break a stray object and the odds are high that some unfriendly types will come investigating.

We're not sure how this will work with your friendly AI, but we've been reliably informed that they won't knock over items unless caught in a firefight – which is, of course, when the Havok 2 engine really comes into play. The developer is obviously loving every minute of this new feature because there are plenty of firefights that take place in rooms full of junk begging to be scattered. That food store loaded with melons in *Metal Gear Solid 2* has a lot to answer for.

Not that this could ever be compared to another game. *Rainbow Six* falls into the category of a game to which others are compared. It's surprising to learn that the developer eagerly watches other squad shooters. "I'm a big fan of imitators because they help to advance the genre," says Lamarche. "As for *Rainbow Six* we were here early on the market but there are so many great games out there now they help to take the franchises to the next step." Quite ironic considering the number of games that have followed in *Rainbow*'s footsteps – the series practically invented squad gameplay.

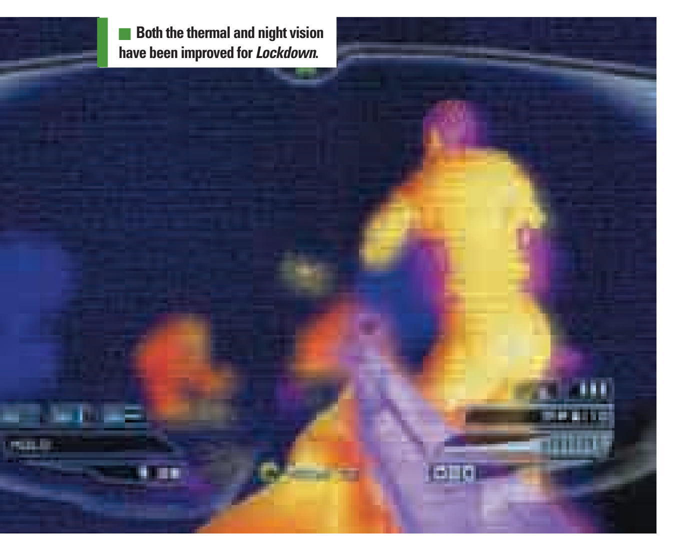
It's no surprise, then, that the game is leading the field again with its squad manoeuvres. As well as giving you the chance to take your aggression out on tin cans and vases the game also allows you to take pieces out of doors. With an appropriate weapon (say, the shotgun) you can shoot out locks, sending doors flying open. Better yet you can aim for the other side of the door, shoot out the hinges and watch the door drop to the floor – Havok 2 working hard again.

As we said, this is so much more than a standard sequel. The dual development team of Red Storm and Ubisoft has put a lot of cool new features into *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*. It goes without saying that this was destined to be an excellent game, but it's only now we realise how great this could become.

TOYS R THEM

A lot of Xbox gamers were disappointed by the release of *Black Arrow* because there were no new toys to play with. This is being made up for in a big way in *Lockdown*. There are a few new gadgets, like the battering ram that can be used to take down doors should you wish to sacrifice the equipment slot, and then there's the important stuff – the new guns. The arsenal is far from finalised but one item has caught our interest already: a combination weapon consisting of an M4 rifle with a 12-gauge shotgun attached. We can see this becoming a firm favourite.

> **"THE NEW OPUS WILL TAKE THE BEST AND MAKE IT BETTER"**
> *JOHN PARKES, EMEA MARKETING DIRECTOR, UBISOFT*



■ Both the thermal and night vision have been improved for *Lockdown*.



RAINBOW SIX: LOCKDOWN

XBOX/MULTIFORMAT

"WE WANTED TO BUILD ON THE SQUAD SYSTEM BUT GIVE A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT TO THE PLAYER"

LOUIS LAMARCHE, PRODUCT MANAGER, UBISOFT

OUT OF WORK?

One way in which the multiplayer aspect of the series has been improved is the addition of a Career mode in the Xbox version. Why? "We wanted to build on the squad system but give a sense of accomplishment to the player," explains Louis Lamarche. In this new mode you can create a player, choose a role (Commando, Medic, Engineer, Spec Op) and join or start a squad. As you play you'll earn experience points that can be used to upgrade stats, and money that can buy new equipment. As you play more you'll also start to earn medals based on your performance. Your service record will be permanently online for others to browse if they want to recruit squad members; the idea is that this should force players to work as a team and concentrate on creating a stable clan. Sadly, you won't be able to play Career mode on the PS2 – for you the developer has created an exclusive Rainbow Vs Mercenary mode. Either way there'll be plenty of online action with *Lockdown*.


eMag

METROID PRIME: HUNTERS

THE HUNTING BAN ISN'T THAT WIDESPREAD AFTER ALL



There are several reasons why *Hunters* is an apt subtitle for this instalment of the *Metroid* series. The emphasis on inter-Samus deathmatches, and the fact you can use the machine's Wi-Fi capabilities to track down other DS owners to challenge has a predatory air. Indeed, these wireless deathmatches may well devour the game's single-player mode.

The reworked controls mean *Hunters* doesn't have the multiplayer problems of its GameCube big brother, *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*. Without the safety net of a lock-on system, more skill is required to hit an opponent, so a wayward stylus will lead to a missed shot. More importantly, there's a freedom of choice in who you target and what you aim at, suiting the need to constantly re-evaluate your position given the quick-fire nature of this mode. Deathmatches become the perfect exhibition for the controls, showing how using the D-pad for movement and stylus for aiming perfectly suits fluid, swift combat.

"HUNTERS DOESN'T HAVE THE MULTIPLAYER PROBLEMS OF ITS GAMECUBE BIG BROTHER"

Current multiplayer levels have been assembled with the Morph Ball in mind, with miniature tunnels leading to power-ups, but the clever layout is negated by the level design inviting players to bunch up in certain areas; hopefully, the deathmatch arenas held back for *Hunters*' release will be more even. The other bone of contention is how the frag count has often proved inaccurate, each DS having different figures. It's easily resolved between friends, who will inevitably dissect what happened, but when playing against strangers this glitch could grow into something more frustrating. Again, this kink should be ironed out by the time *Hunters* appears on the shelves.

Of course, there's more to *Metroid Prime: Hunters* than wireless fragging. The single-player mode is shaping up as the natural evolution of the series on handheld, aiming to recapture and replicate the scope and grandiose nature of *Metroid* on the DS. As mentioned, Samus is no longer shackled to a lock-on system, so while the look is undeniably *Metroid* the feel has been nudged from platform leaping towards shooting.

Whether this turns out to be a reflection of the single-player experience remains to be seen, but on multiplayer alone *Hunters* has bags of playability and could be the first title to unlock the DS's wireless potential.

DETAILS

FORMAT: DS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: TBA
GENRE: First-Person Shooter
PLAYERS: 1-4

CONCEPT

Metroid Prime is shrunk down and spruced up with a stellar multiplayer mode for its first handheld outing.

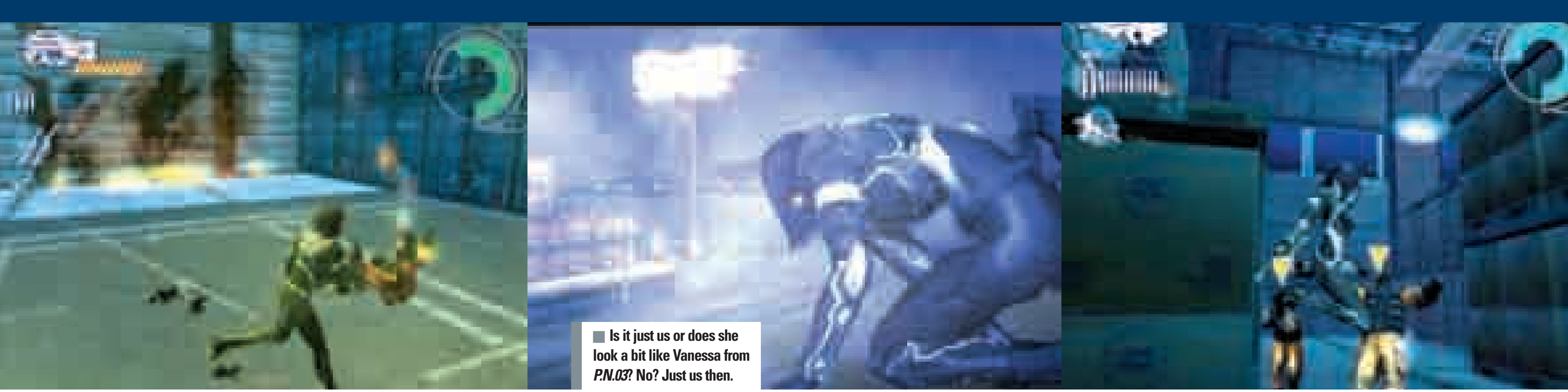


The DS controls make moving and aiming surprisingly easy and fluid.

Multiplayer mode here eclipses the disappointment of *Echoes*.


eMag

GHOST IN THE SHELL: STAND ALONE COMPLEX



Is it just us or does she look a bit like Vanessa from *P.N.03*? No? Just us then.

CAVIA GETS INTO THE SPIRIT OF THINGS

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Atari
DEVELOPER: Cavia
RELEASE: 25 Mar '05
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1-4

CONCEPT

Take on terrorists and uncover conspiracies by playing your favourite characters from *Ghost In The Shell*.

If you've only ever seen one anime movie then it'll probably be… well, actually it will probably be *Akira*. But if you've seen two, then the second is almost guaranteed to be the amazing *Ghost In The Shell*. Anyone who's seen it will vouch for the fact that with its intricate futuristic storyline and the level of thought required to actually understand what's going on, it may not be the best basis for a videogame.

In fact, *Stand Alone Complex* isn't based on the film, nor is it linked to the planned sequel that should be winging its way onto our screens in the near future; it's actually based on the hugely popular Japanese TV series that was spawned by the film.

"ANYONE WHO'S SEEN THE FILM WILL IMMEDIATELY VOUCH FOR THE FACT THAT IT MAY NOT BE THE BEST BASIS FOR A GAME"



You can expect plenty of kung fu action as your leading lady is pretty handy when it comes to launching her limbs at people.

Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex will put you in control of a couple of characters from the series: Major Motoko Kusanagi, Bateau and the Tachikoma (a huge, spider-like tank thing). Each character will stay true to the show with moves and combos that fans will recognise, and some nice bullet-time slowdown effects will be sprinkled on for good measure – after all, no game is complete without them.

The story begins when Major Kusanagi and Bateau are sent on a mission to put an end to a fearsome organisation's illegal arms trading. As well as the obvious carnage this will generate, a separate story unfolds as you progress through the missions, and in true anime fashion various twists and turns will no doubt keep you on your toes.

Ghost In The Shell isn't really known for its violence, so it was a little surprising to see the game in action and find that it's unlikely we'll be looking at anything other than a straight action title with plenty of gunfire and flying limbs. The puzzles you do come across are, as a rule, obvious and generally involve pressing the odd button to open the way forward, and the platform areas seem to be more a case of gradually learning the route and mastering jump distances.

Simple it may be, but it's not looking too bad. Although all the multiplayer action will be split-screen, both Deathmatch and Co-op modes have been promised and the wealth of unlockables that we've come to expect from Japanese titles will also be present to keep you keen. One thing's for sure – you've never had a better excuse to start watching some anime.

THE SETTLERS: HERITAGE OF KINGS



"WE BELIEVE WE SUCCEEDED IN RENEWING THE FRANCHISE BY ADDING NEW GAMEPLAY AND DESIGN ELEMENTS WHILE KEEPING THE ESSENCE OF SETTLERS"

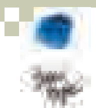
BENEDIKT GRINDEL, PRODUCER, BLUE BYTE

■ The structures all have moving parts that add to the feeling of realism.

■ The dynamic weather conditions can turn rivers into icy battlefields.

THE SETTLERS: HERITAGE OF KINGS

PC



DEVELOPER PROFILE

Dusseldorf-based developer Blue Byte Software's reputation is based almost entirely on two franchises: *The Settlers* and *Battle Isle*. Founded in 1988, the company is now fully owned by Ubisoft, and has broadened its horizons a little with releases such as *Game, Net & Match*, *Incubation* and *Stephen King's F13*.

HISTORY

- **THE SETTLERS IV** 2001 [PC]
- **SERF CITY: LIFE IS FEUDAL** 1993 [Multi]
- **BATTLE ISLE** 1991 [Multi]



The cutesy visuals have been sacrificed for a more realistic vision.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Blue Byte
RELEASE: 18 Feb '05
GENRE: Real-Time Strategy
PLAYERS: 1-8

CONCEPT

The Settlers move into 3D at long last, and the emphasis of the game shifts to encourage you to expand your kingdom a bit further than was previously necessary.

WILL THE LITTLE BUGGERS NEVER DIE?

Before reading any further, make sure you're sitting down and within easy reach of a qualified first-aider. Ready? Then prepare yourself for some heart-fluttering news: *Settlers* has gone 3D. That's right, a mere five years or so after the rest of the games industry figured out that three dimensions were better than two, those loveable Settlers have followed suit. The fact is, *Settlers* has remained something of an enigmatic force on the PC. Somewhere, people must buy this kind of thing in droves. We suspect the Germans. In the UK, however, the appeal of the cute and cuddly little fellas and their over-simplified brand of strategy has never really caught on.

One welcome change that the move to three dimensions has brought for this fifth outing is that the cutesy visuals of earlier incarnations have been abandoned somewhat in a shift towards more realistic graphics. Elsewhere, however, this looks likely to remain classic *Settlers* fare, albeit with the aim slightly more on expanding your horizons and taking over neighbouring kingdoms.

Everything has always been linked very closely in *Settlers*, and this theme is continued in part five; workers need places to eat and sleep, as well as blacksmiths to make tools for them, while soldier units need to be supported by a solid infrastructure to provide them with the necessary finances and motivation. This way of making most elements of the game interlink, thereby making it essential that you tackle them all, has divided gamers. There are those who welcome it and claim it stops players concentrating all their efforts on a single element, but there are also those who suggest it stifles individual freedom and causes every game to be played in the same manner.

To its credit, Blue Byte has tried to steer away from the latter complaint by imposing strict population limits that make the player move their citizens out of towns, forcing them into deciding to specialise to some degree on certain elements of their city, but whether or not this has been done sufficiently well to negate the repetitive feel of the gameplay remains to be seen.

One thing that certainly needs more work is combat. By increasing the emphasis on fighting and expanding, the preview version merely serves to annoy as the limited instructions that can be given to armies becomes increasingly irritating – a matter not helped by some rather frustrating AI. Fingers crossed that this is something that will be given plenty of attention between now and the release date, because in its current form *Heritage Of Kings* is going to have a lot of gamers tearing their hair out by the handful.

That's not to say it's all doom and gloom – there is certainly much to be positive about at this stage, with the dynamic weather in particular proving a joy to behold. Rivers freeze over, allowing battles to be fought on them, while the changing weather affects how units will behave. It's even possible to study alchemy and then change the weather in battle – rendering legions of enemy archers useless by whipping up high winds is astonishingly satisfying.

To be blunt, the Settlers have never endeared themselves to the serious gamer and this beta version looks unlikely to change the situation. However, there are some good ideas here and if the game evolves along the right lines we may see an interesting stage in the franchise's development.

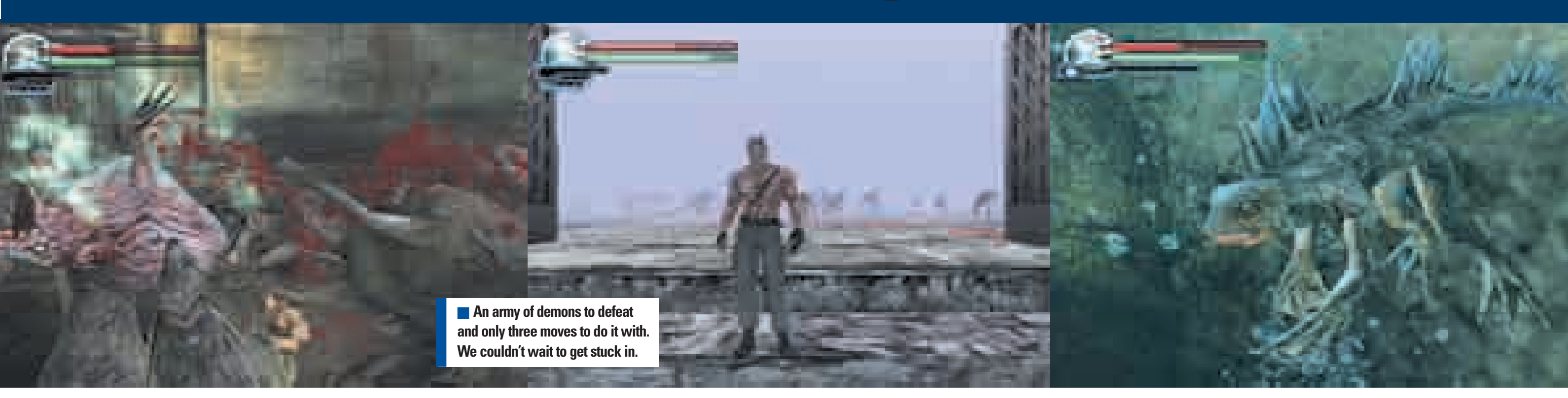
"THE DYNAMIC WEATHER EFFECTS IN PARTICULAR ARE A JOY TO BEHOLD"

EVERY LITTLE HELPS

The development team is particularly proud of the game's environments, with plenty of attention being lavished on incidental animation that helps each town feel much more realistic. Criterion's RenderWare engine has been used to develop the game, and this has made all sort of little extras possible. Trees sway gently in the breeze, for example, while pretty much every building features movement of some sort, like a flag or waterwheel. There's also a wide variety of wildlife, with rabbits and deer populating the forests, and the weather effects are truly impressive. This is more than just a cosmetic touch, however; as the conditions can have a huge bearing on how the game plays and how efficient the Settlers are at their jobs.


eMag

ALTERED BEAST



An army of demons to defeat and only three moves to do it with. We couldn't wait to get stuck in.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: Q1 '05
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

Using your ability to transform into various animals, you'll fight through hordes of genetic experiments and learn the truth about your murky past.

IT'LL BRING OUT THE ANIMAL IN YOU

PS2 **It's always worrying when we find out that the classic games that devoured hours of our childhood are getting remade for a new generation.** These are titles that sparked our interest in gaming to begin with and, in a roundabout way, led to the creation of the magazine you hold in your hands today. Sure, there have been fine remakes and updates but, as we've seen with games like *Golden Axe* and *Gauntlet: Dark Legacy*, some just leave you feeling like your treasured memories have been defiled. It's not pretty.

As it stands, *Altered Beast* is looking very much like one of these offensive titles, and after a good play of the early preview code we can't help but feel that we're going to be hugely disappointed.

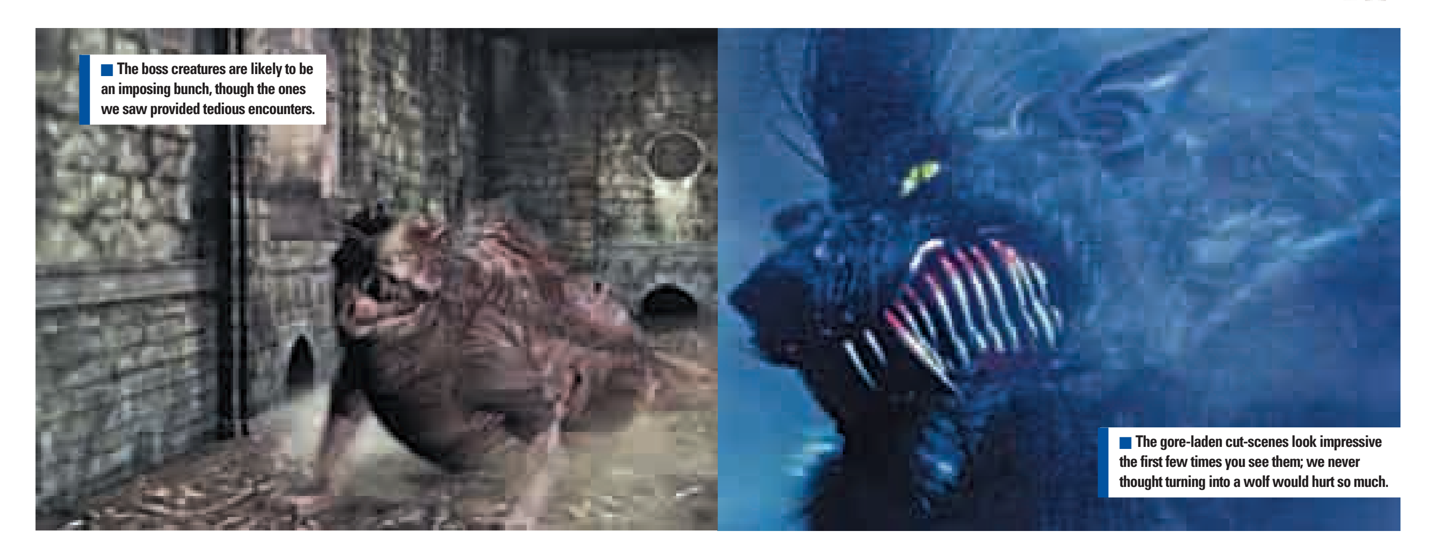
The game itself actually looks to have many good ideas. Obviously the ability to shift between animal states will be a key element of gameplay and eight fantastical creatures will be available (including a Dragon, Minotaur and, of course, Werewolf) each with their own individual fighting styles and skill-set. Your character will also be able to absorb extra DNA that's found along the way to enhance each of the forms in several different ways. This feature should allow a certain level of character customisation, letting you gradually build a character that suits the way you play.

These features should really aid *Altered Beast* in being a game that does the original proud, but instead it seems to be turning into a title that has more in common with the monotonous *Hunter: The Reckoning* than the action-packed monster-fest that it could be.

There was a time when seeing over 30 enemies on the screen at any one time would have been hugely impressive but this just isn't the case any more, and while we were playing through the first few levels of preview code these sights proved not only unimpressive but merely indicated that the next ten minutes would be spent using a meagre selection of moves to hack away at monsters until a barrier – constructed of surprisingly solid mist – disappeared.

Thankfully, with no confirmed release date as yet there's still time to amend the gameplay errors that are present in the early code and *Altered Beast* may turn out to be something more than yet another poor update of a classic. We hope.

> "THERE WAS A TIME WHEN SEEING OVER 30 ENEMIES ON SCREEN AT ONE TIME WAS IMPRESSIVE – NOT ANY MORE"



The boss creatures are likely to be an imposing bunch, though the ones we saw provided tedious encounters.

The gore-laden cut-scenes look impressive the first few times you see them; we never thought turning into a wolf would hurt so much.

WIPEOUT PURE

THAT'S WHY THEY CALL ME MR FAHRENHEIT

How can a series go from almost universal praise to shearing opinion in two in the space of a couple of years? The first two *WipEout* games are still regarded as a couple of the finest in the PSone's catalogue, the third game felt a little tired, while *Fusion*'s slight change in direction and buggy nature caused a lot of people to lose faith in an otherwise fantastic series. So, as the name *Pure* suggests, the team working on this likely PSP launch title has gone back to the series' origins to try to recapture the original magic in handheld form. And judging by our recent playtest at the PlayStation Portable's London debut, things are cruising along at a most impressive pace.

Above all else, the Liverpool-based development studio is keen to emphasise that this is not in any way a port. Twelve all-new tracks make this clear from the off, and even the existing teams and ships have been given a redesign for the first handheld entry in the series. There are also a couple of new racing teams to choose from, and with newly balanced stats all round Sony has tried to ensure that no one ship is exploited (and similarly that none are redundant). If nothing else, this should make each race a varied and enjoyable experience. Then there's the four classic tracks hidden away for the persistent racer to find, one from each previous version of the game.

Pure will also see the welcome return of Zone mode, by far the stand-out moment of *WipEout Fusion*. If you didn't see it first time around, Zone does away with all but the most basic controls and slowly builds the rate of acceleration until your brain can't keep up, let alone find time to send signals to your hands. Cue a flaming wreck scraping walls at insane speeds until it heads for the big ship graveyard in the sky. This time around, Zone mode has its own set of courses as well rather than using the existing racetracks – even more reason to put your eyes through the ultimate test on the PSP's gorgeous 16:9 screen.

There are a couple of glaring changes atop the mound of minor adjustments and recurring elements, affecting both the energy and weapons systems. The two are now more closely linked than ever but traditionalists will most likely mourn the loss of the pit lane – instead, acquired weapons can either be used to annoy and destroy opponents or be absorbed into the ship to restore shield power. This new mechanic does take a while to click, especially if you're used to the *WipEout* series and the tactics that come from having to pit in, but with a little practice the new system can work just as well.

Weapons themselves are drawn from the entire arsenal offered by the series, meaning favourites like the Quake Disruptor sit alongside missiles and boosts once more. There will also be several ship manoeuvres, a side-shift move sending a nod *F-Zero*'s way and another as yet undisclosed ability adding to combat potential, even at speed.

WipEout Pure already has a place set aside on our shelves. As visually stunning as it is technically impressive, the wireless multiplayer alone has already seen this speed onto many a wish list, and if ever there was a reason for even those lucky enough to already have a PSP to anticipate the European launch, this is it. So wipe the drool from your chin, set your alarm clock for March and rest your eyes while you still have a chance…

"ACQUIRED WEAPONS CAN EITHER BE USED TO ANNOY AND DESTROY OPPONENTS OR BE ABSORBED TO RESTORE SHIELD POWER"

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSP
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: March '05
GENRE: Racing
PLAYERS: 1 (2-8 via Wi-Fi)

CONCEPT

Sony's Liverpool studio turns its attention to the new wonder handheld and breathes life into the *WipEout* series by taking it back to its glorious roots.

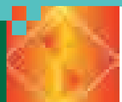
WI-FI SERIOUS

No element of the PlayStation Portable's functionality is being ignored or taken for granted in the creation of *Pure* – the stunning visuals set new standards for a handheld but it's with the wireless connectivity that Sony has really pulled out all the stops. Wi-Fi link-up allows up to eight players to compete on any of the game's circuits, trade ghost data to keep even time trial modes entertaining and, best of all, the service will also allow new content to be downloaded to the memory stick. This will include tracks, vehicles and music and again represents a stunning and original achievement for a portable title. If only all forthcoming PSP titles showed this amount of ingenuity and promise, we'd never need another handheld.



Taking this kind of turn at insane speed is the ultimate thrill *Pure* can deliver.

Tired of racing games with flat tracks? *Pure* revives the 'don't look down' factor.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

Like a phoenix from the ashes of Psygnosis, SCEE Studio Liverpool sprung up midway through the PSone's life but has only recently begun to be directly credited for its efforts. Even though many of the old *WipEout* teams have now gone their separate ways, Studio Liverpool has amassed the talent to do the series justice.

HISTORY

- **FORMULA ONE 2003** 2003 [PS2]
- **WIPEOUT FUSION** 2002 [PS2]
- **FORMULA ONE 2001** 2001 [PS2]

"WIPEOUT PURE DISTILS THE ESSENCE OF ANTI-GRAVITY RACING AND FUTURISTIC ADRENALINE-FUELLED COMBAT"
SONY PRESS RELEASE

Jaw-dropping visuals in full effect. If only we could control the ships with a stylus…

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

BACK TO THE FUTURE

WIPEOUT FUSION + BUMPINESS + DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT = WIPEOUT PURE

PROJECT: SNOWBLIND



No, this isn't a glitch. Using heat-sensitive night vision shows you enemy locations even when a wall obscures your normal view.

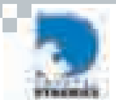
VIDEOGAMES MATHS

BLAST FROM THE PAST

DEUS EX ÷ KILLZONE x N64 GRAPHICS = PROJECT: SNOWBLIND

"PROJECT: SNOWBLIND IS THE ANSWER FOR THOSE LONGING FOR A NON-STOP, ACTION-PACKED RIDE"

JOHN CHOWANEC, CRYSTAL DYNAMICS



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Founded in 1992, California-based Crystal Dynamics has had an illustrious life, having worked with publishing firms like Midway, Electronic Arts, Microsoft and Activision. Now under the wing of Eidos, the company responsible for the wonder known as *Gex* is to develop the publisher's next *Tomb Raider* game.

HISTORY

- **LEGACY OF KAIN: SOUL REAVER** 2000 [Dreamcast]
- **GEX: ENTER THE GECKO** 1998 [PSone]
- **PANDEMONIUM!** 1996 [Saturn]

TOO LITTLE A FEW YEARS TOO LATE?

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS2, Xbox, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Eidos
DEVELOPER: Crystal Dynamics
RELEASE: Feb '05
GENRE: FPS
PLAYERS: 1-16 (Online)

CONCEPT

■ The year is 2065, the place is war-torn Hong Kong and you're Nathan Frost, a soldier with ability-enhancing implants striving to overthrow an evil regime.

PS2 **Tired of giving us increasingly accurate representations of real-life wars, developers seem to be turning to giving us visions of the future; a future where the developed world's foul play sees our streets and offices turned into the battlegrounds of tomorrow.** *Project: Snowblind* sees you take control of 2nd Lt. Nathan Frost, a regular soldier turned bio-modded super trooper sent to the front lines of war-torn Hong Kong. You're stuck behind enemy lines with just a handful of your men and your task is simple: shoot your way through the levels, reach checkpoints, and eventually destroy the regime's weapon of mass destruction.

Imagine *Killzone* but less gritty, with soft, N64-like graphics (that, while generally dark, use bold colours in the oddest places), and you can sort of imagine what *Project: Snowblind* is like. Like *Killzone* you start in the thick of the action with your men running around shouting while making vague attempts to shoot enemy soldiers; enemy soldiers that either stand out in the open like lemons or follow a timed routine between two positions that starts off with them being hidden but soon sees them them also standing in the open like lemons.

Currently, there's nothing particularly stunning about the way the game plays out. Missions invariably involve steady progression though narrow streets and corridors while you gun down groups of highly unsophisticated enemy soldiers as your own team of highly unsophisticated soldiers does little to help. Occasionally, the game gives you more complex goals other than just getting through the level without being killed; you'll often be required to infiltrate enemy bases with an express purpose, such as disabling weapons of mass destruction, but it's nothing that hasn't been seen before.

Still, the game is far from finished and there is time to give it a bit more punch, which the development team will need to do if this is to stand out in an oversaturated genre. The most interesting element is the way in which you can power up your character's ability with Biomods. This is hardly a new idea, but perhaps the game can take it further.

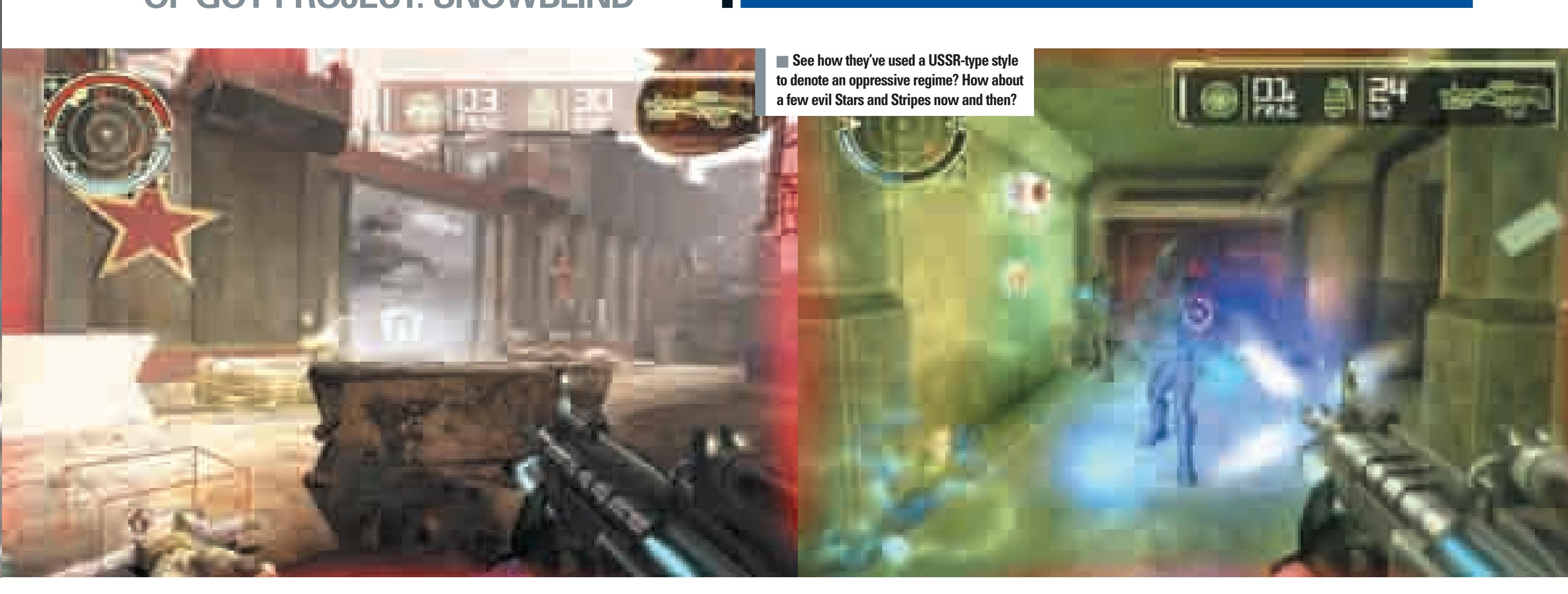
We've got the now-customary online option as well, which will support 16 players, with the Xbox and PS2 versions having extra game modes not present in the PC version. But will this be enough to spice up what's looking to be a fairly standard FPS? Once, an online mode – no matter how average – could breathe life into a game simply because better examples of the genre couldn't offer the thrill of blasting and shouting at real-life opposition, but times have changed.

In a gaming age where *Halo 2* exists and just about every pretender to the FPS crown has already done things that *Project: Snowblind* is offering, we're unsure of where this is meant to fit in. Can it surprise us?

> "IMAGINE KILLZONE BUT LESS GRITTY, WITH N64-LIKE GRAPHICS, AND YOU'VE SORT OF GOT PROJECT: SNOWBLIND"

CAN YOU TIE MY SHOELACES?

Crystal Dynamics is attempting to make gamers feel an "emotional connection" with their fellow soldiers that goes further than you simply becoming irritated by their constant uselessness. If it wasn't enough that your buddies find it hard to identify and fire at enemies, you have the ability to rescue, heal and protect them. By making your squad an ineffectual group of children, the developer is assuming you'll feel a kind of kinship towards them instead of becoming increasingly frustrated by their continued ineptitude. The thing is, if you choose to ignore their cries for help, let them bleed and eventually die, you'll be guilt-tripped at the end by way of a war memorial presenting the names of the soldiers you failed to help.



■ See how they've used a USSR-type style to denote an oppressive regime? How about a few evil Stars and Stripes now and then?

ACT OF WAR: DIRECT ACTION



We're no experts but surely planes are supposed to fly a little higher than this?

Wounded enemies can be captured for a cash bonus, like some kind of weird, twisted game show.

WE WILL FIGHT THEM ON THE HIGH-END PCS

In cinema, music and even gaming, genres are becoming so dated and broad we're being sold many products under banners that make them sound much less generic than they actually are. So when a press release describes *Act Of War* as a "near-future, geopolitical techno-thriller" and the pretty screenshots fail to excite to any major extent, alarm bells start to ring. But looking beyond the five-word genre and seeing those static images come to life on-screen has proved to be one of the smartest things we've done in ages.

While *Act Of War* may have been sold to us as "the new *Command And Conquer*", extended play suggests this might not be as ridiculous a claim as it appears. Between the similar feel of the two games and the fact that the RTS genre has grown fairly stagnant, it's easy to see where such comparisons could arise. Live-action cut-scenes break up the warfare with higher production values than most made-for-TV military drama, furthering the plot in a way that reflects the game's 'realistic' situations; during a lengthy campaign, you'll visit the likes of San Francisco, Washington DC, London and Moscow, eliminating the least savoury residents of each.

Strategy games generally fall into one of two camps – the resource management-heavy type where most levels can be won simply by outnumbering your foes, and those more tactical titles where lost troops are often irreplaceable. *Act Of War* sits between these categories, offering a thoughtful and strategic experience while still maintaining accessibility.

There's a clear emphasis on keeping your squads alive, so as injured soldiers begin to slow your advance, only a visit from the Ambulance unit can get them back on their feet. But as well as having its own slant on the traditional RTS gameplay, all the elements you might expect from both genre and scenario are in place – driveable vehicles, buildings to fortify, famous locations to defend and so on.

What begins as a decent-looking game comes into its own when the engine is really put to work. Massive recognisable locations teem with well-animated people; explosions rock cities in a fairly convincingly manner; and so long as your machine doesn't start chugging when it all kicks off, confrontation in general is really quite impressive. As with many recent PC games, it's an incredible sense of scale that really reminds you why you invested so much in graphics cards and memory. Some of the later missions we saw get to the point where there's simply so much going on that you won't know where to start looking, and while zooming in lets you take in all the hard work the graphics artists have put in, you really have no choice but to pull it right back and enjoy the whole area if your plans are to be all they can be.

At this time, there's little that you could really pick out as a true highlight of *Act Of War* – every element appears equally competent. Similarly, there's nothing glaringly wrong at the game's core and with a few months still to tweak, polish and finish the game, we're hoping for big things. It's been a while since we've had a modern real-time strategy title we can really get our teeth into – as fun as it can be ordering slobbering Orcs and armour-clad Romans around, there's a definite thrill to seeing a wall of tanks plough through London as the sky becomes obscured by aircraft. This puts *Act Of War* in good stead to be a safe strategic bet come March.

"THERE'S A DEFINITE THRILL TO SEEING A WALL OF TANKS PLOUGH THROUGH LONDON AS THE SKY BECOMES OBSCURED BY AIRCRAFT"

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Atari
DEVELOPER: Eugen Systems
RELEASE: Q1 '05
GENRE: Real-Time Strategy
PLAYERS: 1 (2-8 Online)

CONCEPT

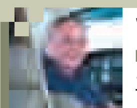
Following in the footsteps of Clancy's day-after-tomorrow technology, *Act Of War* takes realistic military threats and offers players a chance to combat them in RTS form.

ME AND YOU VERSUS THE WORLD

One of the most appealing prospects of *Act Of War* is its online multiplayer. Up to eight generals will be able to forge allegiances and crush enemies over the web or a LAN connection, and, sure enough, the ridiculous scale and potential of the single-player experience is carried over well to versus play. But take it from us, before you head online you'll want to put in a lot of practice in Skirmish mode against the CPU – the internet is home to some of the world's most unforgiving RTS players and only the best commanders will be able to go home and claim their medals.

ACT OF WAR: DIRECT ACTION

PC



WRITER PROFILE

Born in Buffalo, New York, in 1956, Dale Brown's usual calling is military fiction – he's penned 15 *New York Times* best-sellers and, with his Air Force background, has now been called in to write the story and cut-scenes for *Act Of War* to keep it grounded firmly in the realms of possibility.

HISTORY

- **WINGS OF FIRE** 2002 [Book]
- **CHAINS OF COMMAND** 1993 [Book]
- **FLIGHT OF THE OLD DOG** 1987 [Book]

Many of the missions are based around real-world locations.

"THE WORLD IS CHANGING TO THE POINT WHERE TERRIFYING WORLDWIDE EVENTS PORTEND A FRIGHTENING VIEW OF THE FUTURE"

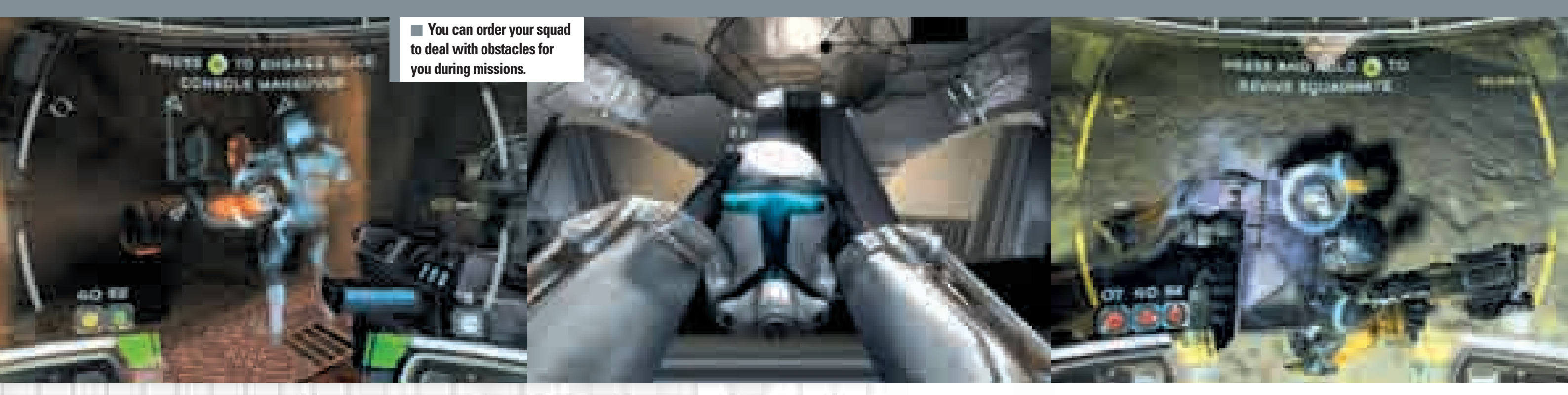
DALE BROWN, AUTHOR/WRITER

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

ALL THE WAR IS A STAGE

COMMAND AND CONQUER + SYNDICATE × GI JOE = ACT OF WAR: DIRECT ACTION

STAR WARS: REPUBLIC COMMANDO



You can order your squad to deal with obstacles for you during missions.

LOCK AND LOAD, TROOPER – STAR WARS GOES ALL VIETNAM

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: LucasArts
RELEASE: 4 March (US: 1 March)
GENRE: FPS
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-8 Online)

CONCEPT

'Be' a Republic Commando in the *Star Wars* universe.

Both LucasArts and Activision have kept deliberately hush-hush about their latest venture into the vast *Star Wars* star system, what with the flood of first-person shooters hitting shelves over the last few months. This has recently changed, however, and you can expect to see a rush of hype for *Republic Commando* between now and its tentative release date in March.

Despite the fact that there have been countless *Star Wars* offerings over the years, nothing quite like this has ever been attempted. While previous (and recent) efforts have tapped into the ready made, heavily characterised universe, allowing you to immerse yourself in *Star Wars, Republic Commando* throws you straight into the heat of battle during the Clone Wars of *Episode II*.

You are a Clone Trooper developed by your peers for one purpose – war. After an intriguing opening cut-scene that takes you through your early years as a recruit up until the present day, you find yourself on Geonosis where you meet other squad members who join you in your campaign. Your squad consists of you and three team-mates: first up is Fixer who can hack into mainframes, unlock doors and break codes; second is Sev the sniper who you can command to take aim from sniping spots during battle; and your third buddy is Scorcher, an explosives expert who can blast a hole through almost anything should you need to gain access to new passages and enemy headquarters.

If this all sounds like familiar territory, it is – *Republic Commando* operates in much the same way as *Rainbow Six 3*. While all the usual commands you'd expect to be able to execute are here – including breaching doors and manning enemy turrets – LucasArts has introduced a number of its own 'signature' abilities such as ordering a squad member to stealthily deactivate a droid's shield before it gets the chance to raise it.

Although no firm details are available yet, the carnage-heavy one-player storyline of *Republic Commando* looks set to house a number of online features including Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch for up to eight players.

At this stage *Republic Commando* is shaping up to be a stellar FPS and an interesting squad-based take on the *Star Wars* franchise, but with a number of other contenders scheduled for release early this year, it remains to be seen if this LucasArts offering can handle the competition.



Your squad: Fixer, Sev and Scorcher, each of whom has a unique set of attributes.

"IF THE GAMEPLAY HERE SEEMS LIKE FAMILIAR TERRITORY, IT IS"


eMag

THE PUNISHER



Slamming a guy's head in the freezer is just a fridge too far.

Interrogating enemies will provide both health and information. It'll be up to you to decide what to do with them once they crack.

"THE PUNISHER IS ONE OF MARVEL'S GRITTIEST HEROES DELIVERING A UNIQUE BRAND OF VIGILANTE JUSTICE THAT IS A PERFECT FIT FOR THE VIDEOGAME UNIVERSE"

GERMAINE GIOIA, VP OF LICENSING, THQ

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

REVENGE WITHOUT SLOWDOWN

MAX PAYNE - BULLET TIME + INTERROGATION = THE PUNISHER



THE PUNISHER
PLAYSTATION2/MULTIFORMAT



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Volition is located in Champaign, Illinois, about 130 miles south of Chicago, and is best known for bringing us the *Red Faction* series. Before the company was known as Volition it was Parallax Software and was responsible for *Descent* and *Descent II*.

HISTORY

■ **RED FACTION II** 2002 [Multi]
■ **SUMMONER** 2000 [Multi]
■ **FREESPACE 2** 1999 [PC]



■ Slaughter mode is where our man really loses it. It'll be one-hit kills from here on in.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS2, Xbox, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Volition
RELEASE: Feb '05
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

■ Do your bit to stop crime by playing one of the most violent comic characters ever created as he tries to avenge the death of his family.

VOLITION PREPARES A DISH THAT'S BEST SERVED COLD

PS2 **Spider-Man and Superman are considered great role models.** Daring and heroic, they always prefer to see their man behind bars rather than lying in a messy heap of diced organs – which, when you consider the fact that super villains never stay banged up for long, is pretty stupid. Sure, it's admirable, but ultimately unsatisfying. What we need is a hero who isn't scared of a bit of bloodshed. And this is why we've always liked The Punisher.

Although obviously heavily influenced by the recent Punisher film, the game isn't linked to the movie and is actually closer to the comic books and as such is based in The Punisher's original home, New York, rather than Florida where the movie was set. With the *Punisher* comics being based on little else other than violence, death and revenge, it would be fair to assume that any game created from the licence would be pretty dark, and it looks like *The Punisher* hasn't lost any of the grittiness that made the comics great.

One of the first things you'll notice is the similarity between *The Punisher* and the *Max Payne* games. Both are tales of revenge with natty trenchcoats to the fore, and *The Punisher* will also borrow Max's story style, which involves starting at the end of the game and playing through 'flashbacks' to arrive at the present. Not wanting to stop there, The Punisher's way of storing and collecting weapons will be similar to *Hitman*'s Number 47; arms found within levels will be added to your arsenal back home and be available for selection at any time. *The Punisher* doesn't seem to mind borrowing ideas from larger titles in the genre, but third-person action games don't really lend themselves to innovation any more and if you must imitate then *Max Payne* and *Hitman* are the titles to emulate.

If there's one thing that *The Punisher* is guaranteed to deliver, it's violence – lots of it. Although the gore level has been toned down since the very early versions of the code, you can still expect plenty of over-the-top, bloody and frankly hideous ways to end the lives of anyone you choose to interrogate. As we expected, this theme of heavy violence is continued into the regular combat, and the ordinary gun-fights that we've all seen a hundred times before are enhanced by the addition of Quick Kills that take down any enemy within grabbing distance in a suitably grisly manner. There'll be several of these Quick Kills for each weapon in the game, which will make for extremely varied scuffles, and they'll range from a simple shotgun blast to the stomach to a worryingly satisfying knife in the face.

> "THE QUICK KILLS RANGE FROM A SIMPLE SHOTGUN BLAST TO THE STOMACH TO A WORRYINGLY SATISFYING KNIFE IN THE FACE"

Although entertaining for anyone who enjoys a good rampage, the game is really going to appeal to existing *Punisher* fans. Many other Marvel characters such as Bullseye and Iron Man, and classic *Punisher* villain Jigsaw, will appear throughout the story, and by completing extra challenges you'll be able to unlock artwork and every comic cover the man has appeared on.

With its fair share of good ideas and controversial content that's bound to stir up tabloids once again, *The Punisher* could be a worthy title. Our only real concern is whether it will still be enjoyable once the appeal of shoving henchmen into kilns and embedding meat cleavers in their faces wears off.

LEAN ON ME

The interrogations are a key aspect of the game. Any enemies can be forced to give out information if you press the right buttons – literally. There will be four regular forms of interrogation that can be performed on anyone at any time, and there will also be various Special Interrogation spots dotted throughout the levels; these will enable you to use the environment to aid you in your search for information and will often see you hanging people from a great height or slamming their face in a door. Of course, once you've got your information it'll be up to you whether you let them go free, continue torturing them or just finish them off in the nastiest way possible. Seems obvious to us…

SHOWCASE

MORE THINGS TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

PIRATE BATTLE

SHIVERING TIMBERS ON THE GBA

Format: Game Boy Advance
Origin: US
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Orbital Media
Genre: Real-Time Strategy
Players: 1-4



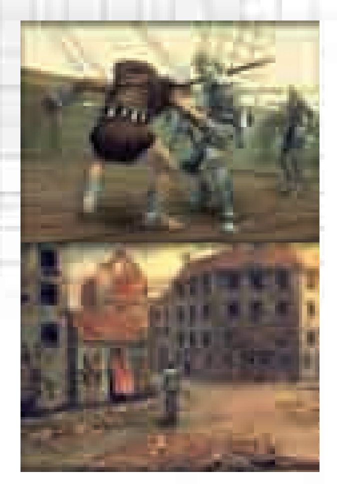
You've got to hand it to Orbital Media for coming up with what seems like the best game idea ever – *Advance Wars* with pirates. Basing its RTS-heavy gameplay around the core ideals of Intelligent Systems' hugely successful game, *Pirate Battle* puts players in the role of one of ten pirate captains, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. You'll have to command an entire crew – fighters, thieves, chefs and more besides – in a quest for the ultimate pirate treasure against other dastardly pirates. There's even four player link-up play planned, which could lead to all manner of swashbuckling hijinks. However, much to our dismay, Orbital has yet to confirm a release for the game outside the US.

RELEASE DATE: TBA '05

ZILL O'LL INFINITE

KOEI GOES INFINITY, NO RETURNS

Format: PlayStation2
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Koei
Developer: In-House
Genre: RPG
Players: 1



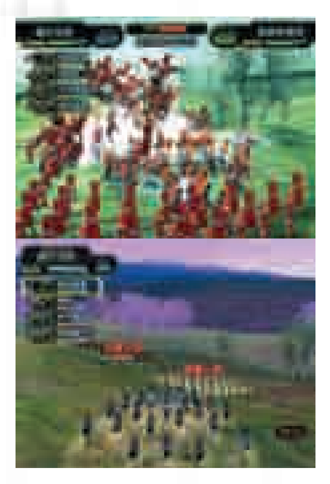
It's not a remake, it's a reinvention – so says Koei with its PS2 take on the seven-year-old *Zill O'll* on the PSone. With the original game achieving massive popularity in Japan, it seems a little odd that Koei has waited this long to create another title… although the fact that *Infinity* is indeed based upon the first game, rather than being a completely new effort, may go some way to explaining this. Bearing more than a few similarities to *Final Fantasy* in terms of combat and exploration, and with a distinctly medieval feel, we don't doubt that this will prove hugely popular – although the chances of a release outside Japan aren't nearly as likely as some RPG fans may like.

RELEASE DATE: Q1 '05 (Japan)

KESSEN III

JAPAN HAS NEVER BEEN SO FEUDAL

Format: PlayStation2
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Koei
Developer: In-House
Genre: Action RTS
Players: 1



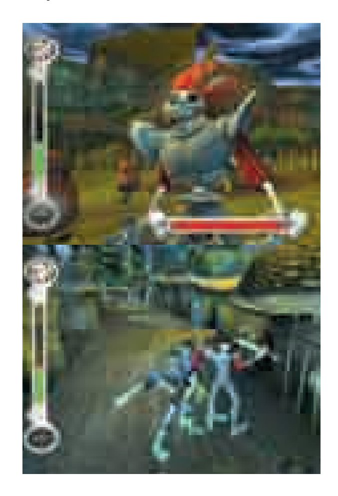
As a strategic counterpoint to Koei's action-based *Dynasty Warriors* series, *Kessen* has enjoyed some success. However, this latest effort – the first in nearly three years – may surprise fans with its unique take on the idea. That several changes have been made should come as no shock, but it's the introduction of real-time control over your troops' movements and attacks that may be enough to push the series in a completely new direction. This, combined with the freedom to attempt missions in virtually any order you see fit, the introduction of many well-crafted and geographically correct battlefields, and complete customisation of your soldiers' kit, suggests that Koei wants this to be the definitive *Kessen* game.

RELEASE DATE: MARCH '05

MEDIEVIL

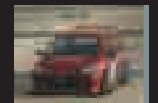
WHEN IS A PORT NOT A PORT?

Format: PlayStation Portable
Origin: UK
Publisher: SCEE
Developer: SCEE Cambridge
Genre: Action/Adventure
Players: 1-2



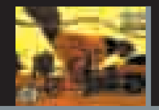
We're always wary when developers are in turns insistent that the game they're working on isn't a port, but then admit that it uses the story and locations from an older game. As such, we don't know what to make of Sony's *MediEvil* for the PSP. Yes, so coding it from the ground up technically makes it a 'new' game, but when actual changes only amount to adding a few new combat moves, bosses, levels and multiplayer mini-games to a PSone title, we can't help but frown. Still, at least it means that we already know what the majority of the game will be like – peppered with funny moments, but ultimately a fairly run-of-the-mill hack-and-slash adventure. Here's hoping Sony proves us wrong.

RELEASE DATE: MARCH '05



Resurrected – Juiced [Multi]

■ Revitalised thanks to THQ, the bling-styled racer is now due to cross the finish line in May – long after *Midnight Club: DUB Edition*, *Need For Speed Underground* et al. Smart move.



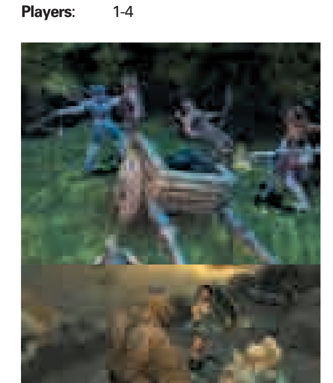
Confirmed – GTA: San Andreas [Multi]

■ We all knew it was coming, but now it's definite – the Xbox and PC versions of *San Andreas* are indeed on the way, with a 10 June release already down in the diary.

CHAMPIONS: RETURN TO ARMS

EVERYBODY INTO THE POOL

Format: PlayStation2
Origin: US
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Snowblind Studios
Genre: Action RPG
Players: 1-4



It seems that being a god, particularly a demonic one capable of shattering into shards of pure hate, has good points and bad. For one thing, you're sure to have followers who want to resurrect you, but then you'll get those annoying heroes determined to stop them – and that's where Ubisoft's follow-up to *Champions Of Norrath* picks up. Offering even more of the *Baldur's Gate*-style gameplay that made the original so engaging, *Return To Arms* brings two new races of playable characters to the table; a host of new monsters, weapons and single-player missions; a more extensive online mode with co-op and competitive modes; and a stash of secrets, quests and items to uncover. Expect an extensive preview next issue.

RELEASE DATE: Q1 '05

CADUCEUS: SURGICAL OPERATION

'NURSE, THE SCREENS!'

Format: Nintendo DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: In-House
Genre: Puzzle
Players: 1



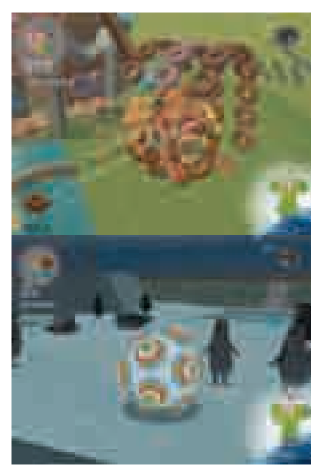
Ah, surgery – the one videogame topic that we haven't seen since the days of *Life And Death*. Thanks to the DS, though, we now have two coming along at once, and while Spike's *Tendo Dokuta* is a rather text-heavy effort (and therefore unplayable if you don't speak Japanese), Atlus' more action-based take on the concept has us intrigued. Placing you as a talented surgeon with a number of patients to deal with, you have to carve people up using the DS's touch screen while urging them to survive by speaking into the microphone. The futuristic setting means the maladies will no doubt be slightly fantastical (space parasites, anyone?) but if we get to perform open heart surgery for fun, that's fine by us.

RELEASE DATE: Q1 '05 (Japan)

MINNA DAISUKI KATAMARI DAMACY

ROLLIN' ROLLIN' ROLLIN'…

Format: PlayStation2
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Namco
Developer: In-House
Genre: Action Puzzle
Players: 1



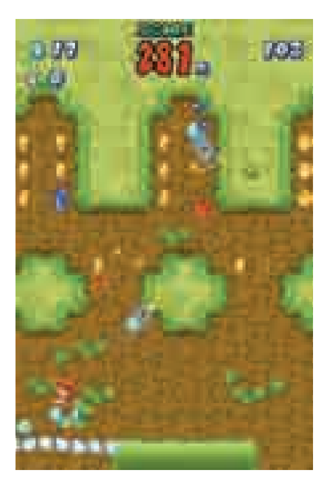
Dear god, can we afford to lose even more of our lives to the cause of the Katamari? With the answer being a massive yes, it's perhaps good news then that the sequel (translated literally as *Everyone Loves Katamari Damacy*) is already well underway. True, the mechanics have changed little – the twin analogue 'tank' controls and continual steamrolling of objects are still present – but as the simplicity was what made the game so loveable in the first place, we have no issue with this. However, the inclusion of more variety in the mission goals, stage settings and even the increasingly bizarre storyline will no doubt be more than enough to keep rolling that Katamari – especially since a PAL release has already been confirmed.

RELEASE DATE: Q1 '05 (Japan)

YOSHI'S TOUCH & GO

TOUCH ME, TOUCH ME NOW

Format: Nintendo DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-House
Genre: Platform/Puzzle
Players: 1



Despite games like *Super Mario 64 DS* and *Sawaru! Made In Wario* being available now, some people are touting *Yoshi's Touch & Go* as the killer app for Nintendo's DS. With the visuals taking several cues from *Yoshi's Island* on the SNES, the gameplay makes use of the DS's functions to bring us a combination of goals. With the vertical stages the aim is to lower the falling baby Mario to safety by drawing clouds around potential hazards and creating a path to Yoshi. The horizontal levels have you guiding the friendly dinosaur past various dangers and helping him keep baby Mario from harm. From what we've played, we're sure it'll work a treat – but will it be enough to convince the critics?

RELEASE DATE: MARCH '05


Power
Temper
Donald
05



Quack, quack… oops **Quackshot – Mega Drive [Sega] 1991**

CREDITS TO THE NATION

FOR YEARS, ARCADE GAMING HAS BEEN SEEN AS A THING OF THE PAST. BUT THINGS ARE AFOOT. THE ARCADE INDUSTRY IS ADJUSTING AND MOVING WITH THE TIMES. AND IF GAMES COMPANIES ARE TO BE BELIEVED, ARCADE GAMING IS DUE A COMEBACK.



Once playgrounds for skilled gamers and a spot of showboating, arcades are now shadows of their former selves, experienced only by very few hardcore gamers who refuse to let them die. However, despite a decade-long downturn, arcades may well be on the up. The industry is trying to make a comeback by offering unique and interesting experiences intended to appeal to passing tourists and hardcore gamers alike. So what are these magical plans that will rejuvenate the arcades? And in such a mass-market age, is recapturing the hardcore even the intention?

The attraction of arcade gaming seems obvious to some figures within the industry. James Hills, marketing director of coin-op manufacturer TLC Industries, believes that 'out of home' gaming is in a unique position. "The games market is bigger than ever before and coin-op games have a huge advantage over other forms," he claims. "Home entertainment platforms are just that – immobile home systems; and mobile and handheld games require that you either have a tiny screen or lug around an expensive device like a Game Boy or PlayStation Portable. Coin-op arcade games can be anywhere [and] require only that the player have some loose change in their pockets."

If only it were that simple.

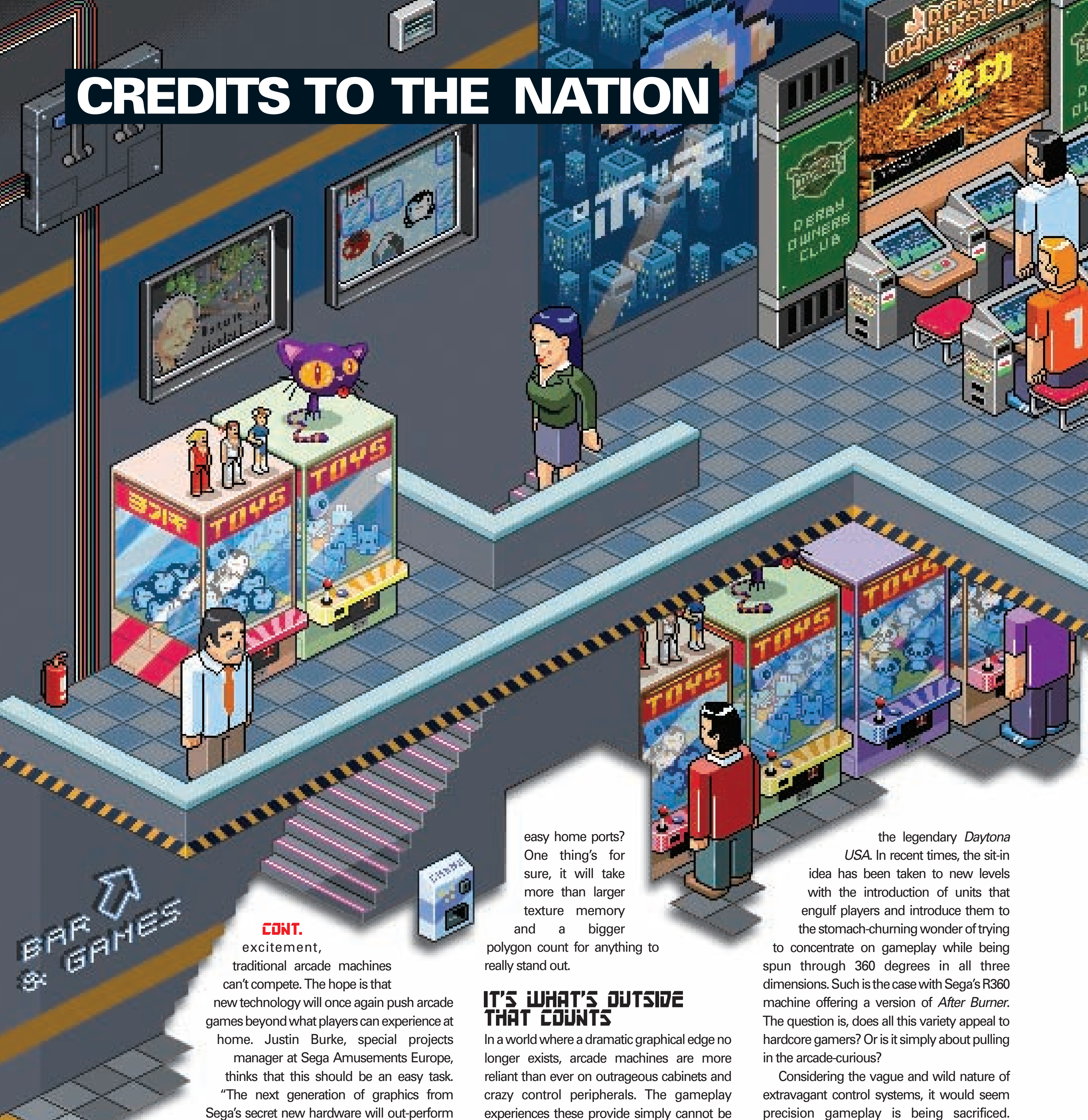
One of the main problems arcades have faced, and something looking to be rectified, is the shift in graphical quality between home and arcade systems. In the past, people were compelled to play arcade games because their graphics eclipsed those of consoles. These days, however, not only do home systems match the graphical quality of arcade games, but offer a bigger variety of larger and more complete gaming experiences for a fixed, one-off cost.

Now often charging upwards of one pound per go and offering only short bursts of CONT.




Coca-Cola
Coca-Cola
DAYTONA
Dance Dance
TOP SKATER
ナイススマッシュ!
KONAMI

CREDITS TO THE NATION



CONT. excitement, traditional arcade machines can't compete. The hope is that new technology will once again push arcade games beyond what players can experience at home. Justin Burke, special projects manager at Sega Amusements Europe, thinks that this should be an easy task. "The next generation of graphics from Sega's secret new hardware will out-perform the current excellent graphics found at home," he confidently predicts.

But even if home machines can be superseded graphically, will the difference be dramatic enough to make people want to pump coins for a few hours? And will arcade developers just continue to develop on arcade systems designed around home console technology (such as the Naomi and Chihiro platforms that are based around Dreamcast and Xbox technology respectively) to ensure easy home ports? One thing's for sure, it will take more than larger texture memory and a bigger polygon count for anything to really stand out.

IT'S WHAT'S OUTSIDE THAT COUNTS

In a world where a dramatic graphical edge no longer exists, arcade machines are more reliant than ever on outrageous cabinets and crazy control peripherals. The gameplay experiences these provide simply cannot be replicated at home, and so offer a unique appeal. The most common devices are guns, ranging from standard pink and blue *Virtua Cop* offerings to pump-action devices, sniper rifles with special eye scopes and massive overhead controllers designed to simulate manning a tank.

Of course, it doesn't end at guns. Also popular in any arcade are the sit-in cabinets that tilt and vibrate to simulate realistic feedback from the on-screen action, as seen in the legendary *Daytona USA*. In recent times, the sit-in idea has been taken to new levels with the introduction of units that engulf players and introduce them to the stomach-churning wonder of trying to concentrate on gameplay while being spun through 360 degrees in all three dimensions. Such is the case with Sega's R360 machine offering a version of *After Burner*. The question is, does all this variety appeal to hardcore gamers? Or is it simply about pulling in the arcade-curious?

Considering the vague and wild nature of extravagant control systems, it would seem precision gameplay is being sacrificed. *Tsurugi* – a game where you kill enemies with a plastic sword peripheral – perfectly exemplifies this. Similar to lightgun games, but with a sword, the gameplay is vague and 'near enough' rather than precise; these fancy devices are not meant for the hardcore, they're simply designed to lure casual players and offer quick thrills to gamers who aren't really concerned with the vagaries of the control methods. "The motion/big box [machines are] absolutely essential to the industry because in







Lightgun games have made a successful transition to home consoles, but variations and fancy cabinets are appearing in arcades.

"JOE BLOGGS WANTS BANG FOR HIS BUCK AND WILL GO FOR THE MOST OUTLANDISH CABINET"

their unique format they offer an experience players will never get at home," says Mehdi Eghbal, international sales director for Tsunami, the company behind the TsuMo Multi-Game Motion System. "The consumer side of the market will always be a bigger market [than the hardcore]," he continues, offering a reason why these fancy cabinets and wacky experiences are essential to the arcade industry's survival.

While hardcore gamers may dabble with such machines, they prefer more sedate experiences where they can concentrate on gameplay. According to industry pundit Ed Andersen, who has worked for companies such as Big Ben Interactive and coin-op distributor The Deith Group, dedicated gamers are more concerned with concentrating on gameplay and the spirit of intense competition than enjoying crazy rides.

"Regulars are pretty anal about the 'quality' of the cabinets – the traction on the sticks, the depth of the buttons and the manufacturer of the controls," Andersen confirms. "Joe Bloggs wants bang for his buck and will go for the biggest, most outlandish cabinet – big guns, quad bikes, dance machines, the works. The end result of their playing does not matter to them. If a steering wheel is not calibrated properly or a gun is off centre, they don't care (if they even notice). Regular players of *F-Zero AX*, for example, prefer the simple twin sit-down model over the moving cabinet purely because the distraction of the movement will affect their lap times."



THANKS FOR THE MEMORY



So rather than satisfying the hardcore, the extravagant concepts and peripherals are designed purely to bring in casual, one-off players. This isn't a bad thing – it keeps arcades alive and brimming with activity, introducing many to the joys of arcade gaming. But once people are in the door, they need something with substance and genuine replay value if their love for arcade gaming is to grow.

This need is to be satisfied by both the emergence of online-enabled arcade games and the increasingly common trend of using IC Cards. These memory cards hold vital player information and allow gamers to not just save progress but customise their entire gaming experience. Using IC Cards, Sega's *Ghost Squad* arcade machine opens up considerably, explains Andersen. "The game uses an IC Card to earn new weapons, change costumes, log what routes you've taken and even create a new layout of enemies, essentially creating a new game each time you play," he says. "Without the IC card the game becomes an average counter-terrorist themed shooter, but with it, the appeal of the game extends exponentially."

Something yet to reach the UK, but booming in Japan, is the introduction of broadband connections into arcades for the purpose of uniting nationwide players. "For hardcore players, the community aspect is important," says Andersen. "The eventual introduction of networked, persistent data systems such as Sega's AM.NET for new games such as *Tekken 5* and *Virtua Striker 4* in the UK market is very exciting."

In Japan, games using IC Card technology are linked via the internet to online data systems where users' information can be stored, meaning that instant, nationwide leaderboards and tournaments are possible. Players can also customise their game (such as change character properties or clothes, or trade items with other gamers) while away from the arcade, using their own internet connection at home. It remains to be seen whether UK amusement parks will get behind



CONT.

I C YOU

IC CARDS EXPLAINED

Costing typically double one credit, IC Cards are a clever way of allowing standard, one-off gaming experiences to become something worth returning to again and again. Typically, the card will store information about your progress and any team or character you happen to be using. *Virtua Striker 4* will use IC Cards, giving gamers the ability to build up unique player sets and then select which ones are available to use in certain games. Gamers without an IC Card can't do this – they're stuck with the default team roster. IC Card players can also build bigger and better home ground stadiums and all their statistics are logged, right down to the number of fouls committed. All types of games are using these cards, and all in unique and different ways, giving a reason for repeat visits. Also, on a more shallow level, simply having the cards in your possession can make you look like a hardcore arcade gamer. What more reason do you need?

CREDITS TO THE NATION

ROLL UP, ROLL UP

WE TEST TWO SWP MACHINES TO GAUGE HOW MUCH ACTUAL SKILL IS REALLY INVOLVED…

The first game we played was *Club Kart Prize*. It's a simple racing game involving, as the name suggests, go-karts, where you pelt your way around tracks collecting coins and avoiding icons that will deplete your cash. Sounds easy? It is. Very easy. Anyone with any skill can rack up loads of money – it's the 'skill' test after the race that's a little harder. You're required to stop within a marker, much like in the *Gran Turismo* Licence Tests; however, unlike in *Gran Turismo*, this seems really random.

It's a similar story with *Pharaoh's Gold*. Using a wildly inaccurate crossbow you shoot at coins and money bags, desperately hoping not to hit icons that relieve you of your payout. After accumulating considerable coinage, you're again, as with *Club Kart Prize*, required to overcome a 'skill' test in order to get paid. Your money pot hangs by a string and you have to shoot the string; miss and you get nothing. Most of the time you miss, with the machine's reluctance to pay out masked by the poor calibration of the gun. People will quite possible replay this a couple of times, believing the only thing standing in their way is their ability to take the off-centre targeting into consideration.

Both of these games use the same 'decider' method in order to reach a payout, and most of the time you'll lose. *Club Kart Prize* is reasonable fun, though, and in any pub this could see frequent play for the purpose of mild entertainment instead of its potential financial reward.

CONT. it. It's likely most of the bigger, London-based arcades will offer support, but will the majority of seaside arcades bother to adopt this costly feature, especially when you consider the current casual and sporadic 'quick fix' nature of the industry? Anderson isn't sure. "[Currently, arcades] just carry out the mantra of 'install and forget', failing to nurture small but profitable communities of players," he comments, highlighting a trend where UK amusement arcades are happy to do what it takes to ensure the passing tourists are spending their cash, but have little time for upgrades, such as updated versions of games or the replenishing of IC Cards. With Japan embracing the idea of communal arcade gaming, LAN venues and cyber cafes are picking up pace too. *Half-Life* developer Valve has entered into an agreement with Namco, which is producing *Counter-Strike Neo* – a variation of the popular PC game featuring a simplified interface and extensive tutorial mode to bring new players up to speed. Namco is using the game as a launching pad for its new Ledzone brand of cyber gaming cafes – a new business with a thousand venues planned over the next three years.

LEAVING HOME

Mirroring the way that PC games have encouraged public displays of group gaming, there's an increasing trend for arcade and 'out of home' game developers to look towards consoles for titles to exploit – a reversal of the normal system of converting arcade titles to home systems. In recent times, franchises designed for home play have been licensed out to arcade manufacturers, presumably to entice gamers by showing them something they're already familiar with, albeit in a slightly different form. For instance, Global VR has signed a deal with Electronic Arts to allow the use of certain EA brands in arcades. *PGA Golf*, *Madden* and *Need For Speed* have been used and give gamers familiarity but with the bonus of the unique cabinet and control experience that only an arcade machine can provide.

If this is successful we'll no doubt see many more licensing deals; already companies such as Microsoft, Nintendo, LucasArts and Electronic Arts have entered the world of content licensing. "It's much easier to take home games and develop them for the coin-op than it is to design them from scratch," explains Mehdi Eghbal. "Home titles are known to players and there is always a following. This reduces the learning curve and allows players to delve right into the enjoyment of the game rather than trying to figure it out."

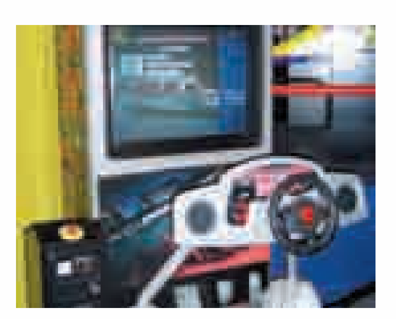
HOLD THE BELLS

One factor that seems to have kept people returning to arcades is the humble fruit machine. Over the years, arcades that once featured a few gambling machines alongside videogames have seen the fruit machines taking over. People are attracted to fruit machines for entirely different reasons to games, and in many people the compulsion to play on for the financial reward is much, much stronger. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that all the major arcade manufacturers are producing some form of gambling device incorporating videogame elements. These range from fruit machines with videogame sub-games to 'Skill With Prize' arcade games – games developed with the intention of replacing the quiz machines found in pubs.

Not just for pubs, SWP machines are becoming a common sight in traditional arcades. Designed to entice gamers by way of a cash incentive, the value of such devices with regard to giving actual games-players a reason to return to arcades is yet to be proved. We tested out two titles from Sega – *Club Kart Prize* and *Pharaoh's Gold* – and were left feeling quite empty by the whole experience

Driving titles with sit-on cabinets have always been popular.

The new breed of 'Skill With Prize' games offer cash payouts.



Elaborate peripherals are a rarity in the console market.



(find out why in the 'Roll up, roll up' boxout).

So is the idea of a cash incentive really the way forward, particularly when you consider that the idea of gameplay and skill is lost as these machines have to offer limited rewards in order to make profits. "Times have changed and all over Europe gambling is becoming a major focus," is the confirmation from Leon Deith of The Deith Group. But despite our reservations, Sega doesn't really see SWP machines as gambling machines. "*Club Kart Prize* is classed as an SWP and is not a gambling machine," claims Sega's Justin Burke. "While the player can win money, it is achieved through skill and not a gamble as in a fruit machine." We're sceptical about how much 'skill' is actually involved in these games, though Burke does explain what developers are hoping to achieve with SWP machines: "The progression of video into video SWP is an important one. Not only does it provide another product for the market, it opens up new areas, such as getting the [videogame] back in the pub market." And this seems to be the point – these are little more than advanced quiz machines.

STAYING OUT FOR THE SUMMER

There's no doubt that there are some exciting developments on the arcade horizon, hoping to entice casual and hardcore players away from their consoles, but will the scene really take off again? Certainly, the potential is there. While gamers will write off new developments and curse the abundance of school-dodging children looking to earn quick cash from SWP machines, there are a host of industry professionals who will tell you this is the most exciting time in the arcades' history.

In truth, neither view is completely correct. In a climate where home consoles and online gaming are the popular choices, arcades have had to adapt and are doing so admirably. The combination of amazing new arcade hardware offering experiences not possible in the home, and IC cards and online network systems appealing to the hardcore, can bring a large variety of people into the arcades. Things may never be the same, but the potential for the new generation of gamers not blinkered by nostalgia to form their own love of arcades and construct their own arcade scene is definitely there.

Video-oriented fruit machines and SWP arcade machines could also positively contribute towards the industry. If they're fun and are at least seemingly reliant on skill instead of being blatantly luck-based, they could be massively popular in the pub sector, which is an excellent way of gently introducing arcade games to the masses.

Perhaps arcade gaming has faltered, or perhaps those young enough to appreciate what's taking place in the industry without feeling obliged to moan about the good old days can rejuvenate the arcade scene for themselves. Either way, no matter what machines are placed inside, some arcades will always be hang-outs for kids with nothing better to do. But wasn't that the idea anyway?

GAME OVER.

WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT?

WITH MORE IMPORTANCE BEING PLACED ON OUTRAGEOUS AND UNIQUE ARCADE CABINETS AND CONTROLS, WE TAKE A LOOK AT FOUR OF OUR FAVOURITE EXAMPLES…

SEGA SUPER CIRCUIT

Released back in 1988, this featured players in traditional sit-in cabinets directing remote-control cars that they would drive around a track. Awesome.

R360

The R360 is – as the name suggests – a machine capable of spinning players through 360 degrees and in three dimensions. The R360 housed games such as *G-Loc* and *After Burner* where its insane, over-the-top spinning could be justified.

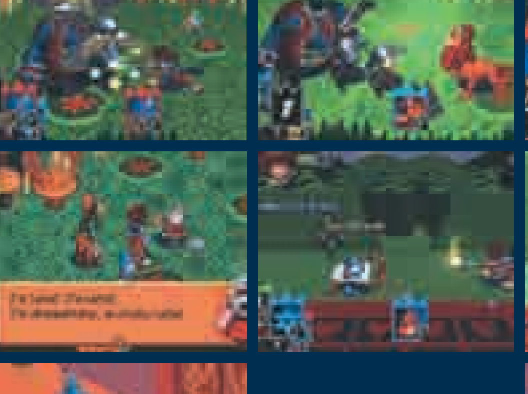
AIRLINE PILOTS

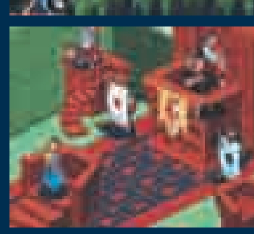
Like *Ferrari F355* before it, *Airline Pilots* uses a three-screen display to present players with a unique experience. Unfortunately, this doesn't really change the fact that the game is about being an airline pilot.

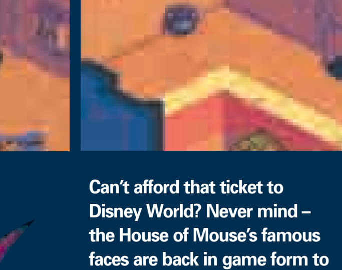
TSURUGI

Imagine a lightgun game, but instead of using a lightgun you're using a sword. As enemies approach you on screen, you swing and lunge like a mentalist. Fun for a while, but like most games of this type, the control is a bit vague.

REVIEWS







Can't afford that ticket to Disney World? Never mind – the House of Mouse's famous faces are back in game form to sit in the palm of your hand.

Kingdom Hearts: Chain Of Memories 84







THE AVERAGE

Despite representing an industry in which high scores mean everything, games™ is not a magazine that marks with the majority. A lot of people think that anything below 7 (7.0, 70%, whatever) is a bad score – we don't. Going on a scale of one to ten, five is the average – average being a game that does what it sets out to do without attempting to do it better than anyone else. If a game gets five you'll get some enjoyment out of it but nothing more, simple as that. What's more, we won't be swayed by PR people telling us what a game's like – we only decide once we've played each game to death and, in the majority of cases, to completion. If a game's bad we'll make sure you know, if it's great we'll sing its praises. At the end of the day, we're just here to help you decide what's worth your hard-earned cash. After all, if it wasn't for you, we'd be out of a job.


Halloween Town is my town. I'm the king of nightmares and the master of terror!

■ The 50-odd courses can be raced normally or reversed. Naturally.

FINGERPRINT

games™

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SNAPSHOT: Take virtual pictures of your virtual cars for virtual fun.

SCALE: No other racer offers quite this much depth and potential for customisation.

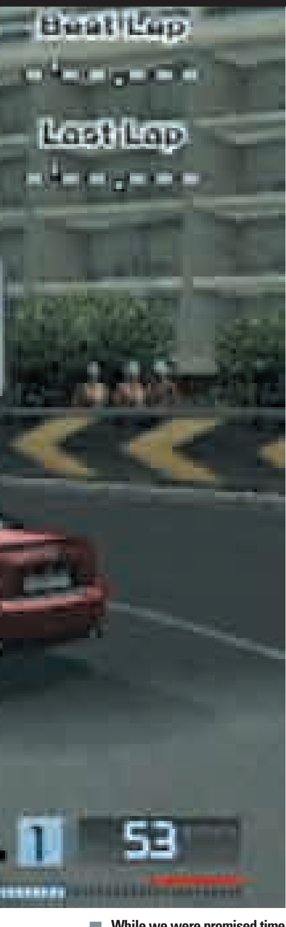


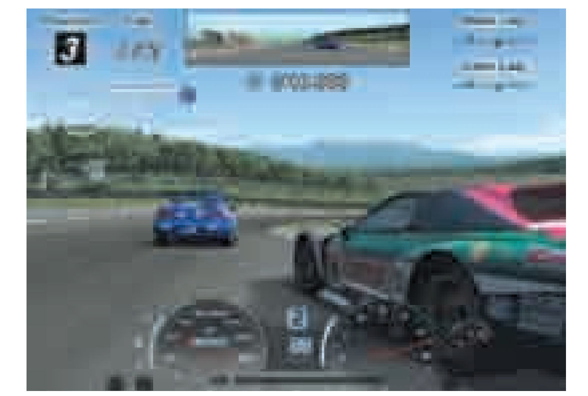
GRAN TURISMO 3

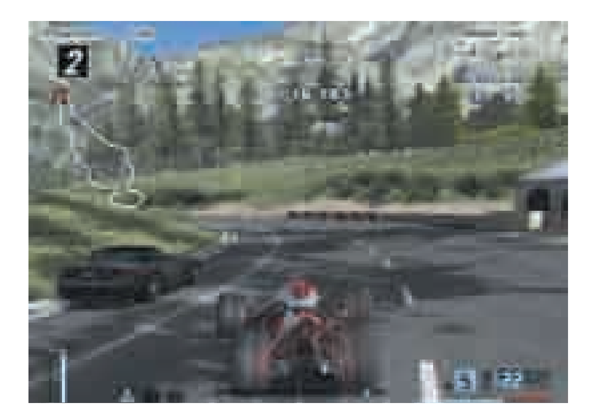
BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

GRAN TURISMO







FOUR WHEELS GOOD, 2,800 WHEELS BETTER

GRAN TURISMO 4

■ While we were promised time penalties for reckless driving, only a few modes actually use them. Shame.

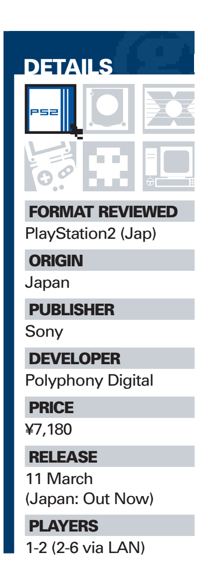
It's been an odd couple of weeks. While we've been rocking *Ridge Racers* at one end of the racing spectrum, *Gran Turismo 4* seems to have been attracted like the polar opposite it so blatantly is. Stranger still, we've managed to get our games mixed up a few times. Not realising that we're braking heavily in *Ridge Racers* until the end of a particularly terrible performance was the first error; dropping out of first place attempting a 360° drift over the finish line in *GT4*, however, was slightly more disturbing. But we've stopped that now. We know which is which. *Ridge Racers* can be picked up in five minutes but this… this could take months, years even, to master.

Even with all the assists on, *GT4* is a game so based in realism and reliant on skill that it makes even its nearest rivals look like *Mario Kart*. Depending on your choice of ride (although 'choice' may be a slightly generous term in the early stages), handling varies dramatically – perfectly tuned sports cars corner like an absolute dream while an ageing five-door saloon with too much going on under the bonnet will simply laugh off the idea of tackling a bend in the road. But even the less responsive cars can be learned to an extent, a degree of over- or understeer sometimes proving useful on certain courses, especially in the hands of a skilled driver.

To call the visuals 'stunning' is as grave an understatement as *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* was an error. Through a decent connection there isn't a PlayStation2 game on the market that looks as glorious and complete as Polyphony's luscious environments and wonderful car models. Even the frame rate remains steady throughout, meaning that even at top speed you'll see nothing but solid, shiny and fluid action. The in-car views have seen most improvements, shaking with every bump in the road and even rising and falling as the weight of your car shifts. This makes the internal cameras even more the choice of the purist, offering further immersion as every clunk of the engine and squeal of the tyres reverberates around the virtual interior.

Polyphony has clearly picked up and acted upon much of the criticism levelled at the series, and while *Gran Turismo* is a franchise renowned for feeling somewhat sluggish, its sense of speed now rates among its finer qualities. Once you get your hands on the meatier machines, long straights can get rather hairy as even the slightest bump sends you spinning into a gravel trap, and a ▷

"THERE ISN'T A PLAYSTATION2 GAME ON THE MARKET THAT LOOKS AS GLORIOUS AND COMPLETE AS POLYPHONY'S LATEST EFFORT"



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2 (Jap)

ORIGIN
Japan

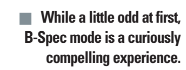
PUBLISHER
Sony

DEVELOPER
Polyphony Digital

PRICE
¥7,180

RELEASE
11 March
(Japan: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1-2 (2-6 via LAN)



■ While a little odd at first, B-Spec mode is a curiously compelling experience.

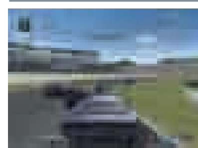




TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

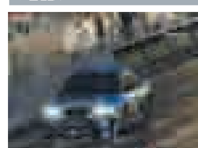
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

1 DAY



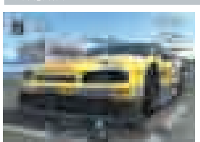
So you've been racing all day and you're pretty proud of what you've achieved. Best check your completion stat – it must be pretty high, right? Only 2%? That can't be right.

1 WEEK



The completion rate may have hit double figures and chances are you've honed your skills and got used to the game to the point where no-one can stand in your way…

1 MONTH



A garage full of cars can't disguise the fact that you've still got hundreds of races to go. Never let it be said that Polyphony doesn't give you decent value for money.

"WHILE NOT AS MORONIC AS IN THE PAST, AI RIVALS WON'T BLOCK YOUR OVERTAKING ATTEMPTS OR TRY TO PASS YOU WITH ANY CONVICTION"

PICTURE PERFECT

For the real purist, it would appear just racing, collecting and upgrading cars isn't enough. No, today's avid worshipper at the Church of Four Wheels needs the ability to take pictures of their ride in various situations; parked in a leafy glen, tearing down a neon-lined street or at the top of the Grand Canyon… these are just a few of the many photographic options on offer. You can later export images you're particularly proud of using a USB memory stick and send them to friends via the magic of email or stare at them for hours on your PC desktop if you're that way inclined. Worth a thousand words? We gave it a hundred or so. Go figure.



Test your car's top speed down the Las Vegas quarter mile.

trip around the Nürburgring Nordschleife really will have you fearing for your life. This sense of risk is a great coup for the series and even though most races still allow for riding barriers and bumper-car cornering, a high-speed impact can send your wheels skyward and leave you facing God-knows-what direction, ruining your chances of victory even if the car remains pristine.

The lack of damage models is a common starting point for *GT* critics but, aside from the fact that it does put a damper on the game's emphasis on realism, it's still not that much of an issue. Damage modelling without a knock-on effect on performance would be similarly unrealistic, if not more so, and in order to accurately gauge, implement and maintain truly realistic damage (and subsequent handling) in such beautiful and dynamic race situations you'd need hardware a little more potent than the ageing PS2. Perhaps this is why Polyphony has touted the feature for the next instalment rather than attempting it here.

Fans of throwing things at walls through blind rage will be delighted to hear that not only are Licence Tests back but they're more plentiful and more challenging than ever before. Bronze targets seem slightly more lenient than they have been but to get anything higher you'll need to follow the perfect line and demonstrate some precision pedal work. But if things get a little tough there's always a demonstration of exactly how it's supposed to be done – helpful as they can be, you can almost see the PS2 give a smug grin after it breezes gold while you've been toiling over bronze for an hour.

As for the game's progression, action is once again split into Arcade and Gran Turismo modes. There's much less emphasis on the former than in previous titles – *GT4*'s Arcade mode is little more than a quick race option as emphasis is piled onto the now-overflowing GT mode. Progress through the ridiculously lengthy driving career will unlock courses and cars for the Arcade mode where you can hone your skills when you're not looking to bring in the pennies through competition racing. But the tournaments themselves will soon test your driving mettle, forcing you into epic races and intense struggles on your way to the top of the lucrative profession. Hundreds of hours will pass and that percentage clock still creeps up like the speedo on a Model T Ford (one of the game's finest unlockables), but with Mission Hall (a series of quick events – a one-corner pass or overtaking an entire pack in a single lap, for example) among other distractions, it'll be a while before you tire of the tarmac.

Finally had your fill of traditional racing? Then look no further than the new B-Spec options that allow you to play the game in an entirely new way. Rather than getting behind the wheel you'll sit in the pits and follow the progress of an AI driver. Sadly, he's a little silly and you'll need to give him orders telling him when to take it easy, when to pass a rival and when to really punch it, obviously putting him more at risk of crashing out. A little like

"WHEN DOES GT4 COMES?"

Big gaming franchises and the events that surround them always bring out the best in the internet. We're no strangers to the world of pre-emptive reader reviews but one particular work has managed to stand out from the many thousands thanks to its concise and informed critique of the game. So, in the wise words of Amazon's finest, a 'review' of *Gran Turismo 4* (rather confusingly entitled "gt3 is great!") for your reading pleasure. Enjoy.

"gt3 is great but there is minimus choose out cars. the tracks are great. gt3 is so long here, when does gt4 comes. first december then juli. come on, when does gt4 comes?"

Breathtaking.





Prize cars for the tougher competitions are as showy as ever. You won't be needing that Mini any more…



While the exterior view is fine, only the cockpit camera really offers a full 'simulation'.

the AI Training in *Virtua Fighter 4*, your driver will gain experience and perform better the more he races and wins based on your advice; it might not seem as involving or entertaining as driving for yourself but it's easy to get caught up in the rise of a racing hero who's only winning with your guidance.

With the absence of online play, multiplayer thrills now come in two flavours – split-screen and LAN. The former offers almost exactly what you'd expect, allowing two rubber-burners to compete head-to-head on a course sadly devoid of other racers. But it's bringing several machines together that excites most. Up to six players can compete with a screen each (equipment permitting) and the feeling of racing against fallible opponents, while great fun, really hammers home what could have been, both in terms of online racing and the promised AI overhaul that didn't make the final cut. You see, your opponents lack the smarts seen in many of today's high-profile racers. While not as moronic as they have been in the past, rivals won't move to block your overtaking attempts or try to pass you with any conviction – pull into their path as they try to get by and they'll go straight up the back of you without considering their fate. Similarly, they'll still rarely stray from the perfect racing line and barely misjudge turns of their own accord. Given how many millions of laps you'll be doing, you'll see this kind of silliness a lot.

Of course, much of the gaming world has been spoiled for thrills by games like the *Burnout* series and *OutRun 2* – the idea of having to work for your enjoyment is one that some gamers will object to on principle in this age of short attention spans. But for those willing to sit down and learn track layouts and car handling, the game unfolds unlike any other and offers an experience that only *Gran Turismo* can. In fact, if it weren't for the fact that simply picking up the controller makes you by far the smartest racer on the course, *GT4* would be perilously close to being the finest, most thorough serious racing game ever made. And we don't say that sort of thing lightly.



AI ASIDE, A SUBLIME RACER

FAQs

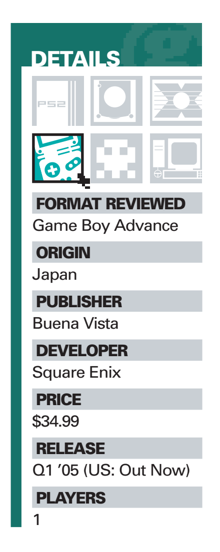
Q. HOW MANY CARS?
In the region of 700. Add paint jobs and mods to that and you're talking silly numbers.

Q. WHAT'S THE MUSIC LIKE?
In a word – eclectic. Van Halen, Bach, The Roots, The Donnas, Apollo 440, Debussy, Less Than Jake…

Q. BUT IS IT FUN?
Depends. There are plenty of better choices for quick thrills but *GT4* caters for a different audience.

IT'S LIKE THE FIRST GAME NEVER HAPPENED

KINGDOM HEARTS: CHAIN OF MEMORIES



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Game Boy Advance

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Buena Vista

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PRICE
$34.99

RELEASE
Q1 '05 (US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1

LOST KINGDOMS II

AS GOOD AS

WORSE THAN

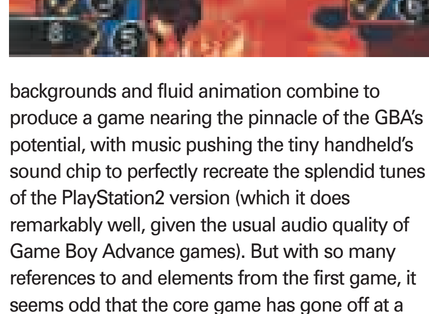
BATEN KAITOS



What is it with card games lately? With *Yu-Gi-Oh!* making trading card games ridiculously popular once more, *Phantasy Star Online* taking an unexpected turn and even Solid Snake trying his hand (no pun intended) at the whole card thing, could it be that the oft vilified genre is finally beginning to find mass acceptance? Of course not. The kids won't give a card game a second look if it doesn't feature Dark Magicians or Blue Eyes White Dragons, and much of the real world still just isn't ready for gaming experiences that require so much effort, patience and work for so little ultimate gain. What's that you say? This one is full of the most popular Disney and Square characters? Well, that changes things entirely. Just sit back, watch it fly off the shelves and get ready to see confusion wash across plenty of faces…

The premise behind *Chain Of Memories* is an odd one indeed. Basically, the various floors of the Castle of Oblivion take on the image of Sora's memories – more specifically, the events of the first *Kingdom Hearts* game. This means that while people who played the PS2 version are in for some very familiar encounters, those that didn't see it through to the end are looking at a one-way trip on the Spoiler Express. Of course, it's not all rehashed material – there are plenty of nice plays on the theme of memory and as many cameos for Disney and Square fans as they could ever wish for.

The clash of Square and Disney, two firms with some of the highest production values in their respective fields, also results in a tempting visual smorgasbord; chunky characters, colourful backgrounds and fluid animation combine to produce a game nearing the pinnacle of the GBA's potential, with music pushing the tiny handheld's sound chip to perfectly recreate the splendid tunes of the PlayStation2 version (which it does remarkably well, given the usual audio quality of Game Boy Advance games). But with so many references to and elements from the first game, it seems odd that the core game has gone off at a tangent, albeit a fairly interesting one.



Gone are the action RPG elements, replaced instead by a strange combination of platforming and card battling. Bizarrely, the battles do still feel remarkably like their PlayStation2 counterparts, but after trying to play even a few



Your strategies will need to change when you reach one of the boss encounters.



Summons and friends tend to dish out most damage, especially when combined.



With each level comes one of two (sometimes three) perks to make Sora's life easier.



Sora's trip to Ancient Greece is the source of much trouble and Strife…

FAQs

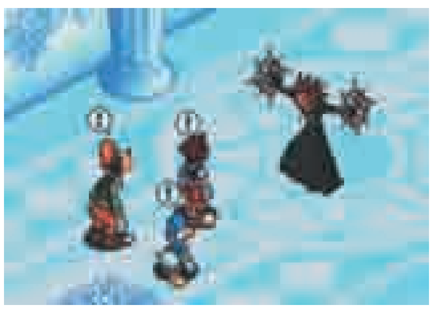
Q. HOW'S THE COMBAT?
A little odd to begin with it but you'll quickly get a feel for it.

Q. HOW DO COMBOS WORK?
You can use up to three cards at a time – Fire, Fire and Fire, for example, produces Firaga.

Q. WHAT CHARACTERS ARE THERE?
Donald, Goofy, Simba, Hercules, Jack Skellington, Pinocchio… the cast is absolutely huge.



Each card has an impact on what the next room will be like.



Well, you'd be surprised at meeting this, wouldn't you?

of them like you would if you holding a Dual Shock 2, the changes become all too apparent. Old hack-and-slash strategies are almost entirely redundant with the mechanics more reliant on usurping the attack values on opponents' cards to counter their blows while managing your deck effectively. As you proceed, you'll learn more strategies and combination attacks (activated by playing several cards at once) and as your deck capacity expands you'll have room for all the powerful Summon attacks as well as plenty of enemy cards that augment powers rather than dealing damage directly.

Perhaps strangest of all is that it isn't just battles that are ruled by cards, it's the whole castle. Every door you find must be unlocked using a card before the area beyond it can be explored, with the item you choose directly affecting the following room. Use Sleeping Darkness, for instance, and you'll find little but a couple of fiendish Heartless knocking out the Zs, while opting for Moogle Room turns the area into a safe zone for the friendly neighbourhood Moogle to set up shop and allow you to tweak your deck. While this doesn't have any bearing on actual level design, it is a lovely touch – rooms can even be changed at a later date by simply using your Keyblade on the door and replacing the card. But to enforce some kind of progression, portals with crowns above require a special sequence of cards before access is granted. This means that while exploration is minimal and your route fairly linear, you do get to shape the contents of each area.

It's certainly an acquired taste and the card system requires a lengthy adjustment period but at least the game is consistent – enemies (bosses in particular) adhere to the same card rules as you, and in longer battles you can even start to learn their decks to counteract them effectively. But *Chain Of Memories*' biggest problem is the repetitive nature of most of the rooms. In order to build up anything that even resembles a decent set of cards you'll need to repeat fights countless times to earn Moogle Points and experience, and the relatively limited number of different Heartless in each area can make this something of a chore. It's worth it in the end, though, and once you manage to combine an amazing deck with the skills and combos you learned while assembling it, you'll realise that there really is a happy ending for this quirky and original addition to the growing *Kingdom Hearts* franchise.

YOUR NUMBER IS ONE

While you may not realise it at first, the number on each card is a lot more important than it seems. The basics are simple – higher card value takes attack priority but costs more CP to put in your deck in the first place – but there are a few neat touches. A '0' value card, for instance, will counter any number but at the same time can itself be reversed with any other card, making it a handy (if risky) addition to any deck. Even the room cards dropped by enemies after a battle have values and you might need to take on a few more nasties than you might like just to get a card good enough to let you out of the room you're in. Life can be cruel sometimes.







Combat can get particularly frantic when the bigger enemies come to play, especially when there's a whole pack of the blighters.



Level 5 is all about the spot effects, and believe us, there are some lovely ones here. You can almost toast your crumpets on that fire…



The graphical style is closer to Namco's *Tales Of Symphonia* than the *Final Fantasy* series, but that's hardly something to complain about.

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2 (Japan)

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

DEVELOPER
Level 5

PRICE
¥9,800

RELEASE
TBA '05 (Japan: Out Now, US: Q3 '05)

PLAYERS
1

DRAGON QUEST VIII

3.7 MILLION JAPANESE GAMERS CAN'T BE WRONG

You know that rumour about how *Final Fantasy* games are to be released only on Saturdays because millions of kids skip school to stay home all day playing? That's halfway a lie. You see, it was actually *Dragon Quest III* that brought this law into effect. And now those kids are grown-ups who would, without a doubt, skip work for *Dragon Quest VIII*.

The west has a history of not quite understanding *Dragon Quest*. The original title sold so many untold millions in Japan in 1986 because, at that time, character designer Akira Toriyama's comic *Dragon Ball* was at the height of its popularity. The original *Dragon Quest* was called *Dragon Warrior* outside Japan because of a silly copyright dispute concerning an old Dungeons & Dragons module called *Dragon Quest*. The box art featured a grotesquely airbrushed fantasy-style man fighting a dragon. More importantly, the game's dinky 8-bit graphics revealed not one square millimetre of Toriyama's signature style. These days, *Dragon Ball Z* is a hot property outside Japan. *Dragon Warrior III* on Game Boy Color was released in 2001 with shimmering box art. And now, for the first time, a *Dragon Quest* game is released in Japan with graphics that live up to two decades of box art.



Let's get specific: *Dragon Quest VIII* looks brilliant. Sure, there are games with more complicated graphics and higher frame rates. There are role-playing games where characters have voices, and cinematics are played out in airbrushed full-motion video. None of this matters. *Dragon Quest VIII* voicelessly carries with it a life force that can never be denied. Anyone who stands in a fortune-teller's office and doesn't mumble something about the immaculate use of purple and red is either not alive or wears mismatched clothes.

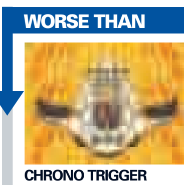
You fight random monsters in the field, gaining levels, saving money for stronger weapons and armour. Seeing your hero's new sword in battle for the first time is always a sharp joy. Battles are simple and turn-based. At each level-up you attribute points to skill sets reminiscent of Dungeons & Dragons. Yes, *Dragon Quest VIII*, as a game, is much like other *Dragon Quest* titles. Yet it is also gorgeous. The battle animations are fluid to the point of being ridiculous. You attack dungeons, fight bosses, progress through a story of comic-bookish political intrigue, earn vehicles and gradually reach a conclusion that feels less like a casino jackpot than several strung-together hours of winning consistently at a slot machine. Either way, it's an almost spiritual pay-off.

FINAL FANTASY VII



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



CHRONO TRIGGER

MIES VAN DE ROHE WOULD BE PROUD

Akira Toriyama has been called the "most recognised living artist", and that's probably right. They love him in France, you know. They always have. They even love him as a fashion designer. Those who say his characters all look the same really can't see beyond the face, fans say. It's the clothes that make a Toriyama man (or woman). Look at Kukule's stylish outfit. My my, look what happens when you dress Jessica up as a Bunny Girl. In the 3D-blessed *Dragon Quest VIII*, Toriyama adds another feather to his cap – architecture. Not only are the towns in this game the most-lived-in looking locales in games since *Shenmue*, they're full of architectural masterpieces. A certain casino in particular is almost violently breathtaking. Make good use of that first-person-view button.

Now this is what's commonly known in the industry as 'bloody gorgeous'. Level 5 has done a great job with those visuals.

The comic-bookish story this time involves a silent hero, a fat bandit named Yangus (his sworn-brother), and a little green creature whose horse-carriage is drawn by the prettiest white horse. The hero was the only soldier in a castle to survive an evil magician's curse. The little green creature was the king of that castle; the white horse was his princess. At the story's beginning they've been scouring the land for a cure for many moons, and soon big leads will see them meeting new friends, sailing, flying, riding a giant panther, meeting that nefarious magician, and saving the entire world. It hooks you deep from its *in medias res* beginning. For the first few hours, you wonder what the princess looked like as a human. And just why did the hero survive the curse untouched?

Design-wise, the star of *Dragon Quest VIII* is the field map. Thanks to the programming ingenuity of Level 5, the first developer other than Enix's Armor Project to ever handle a *Dragon Quest* title, the deep, rich, expansive, persistent, mountainous, cavernous field map nearly achieves the mysterious status of a beloved character. Exploring it is arguably 80 per cent of the game's fun. So many throwaway details and bonus monsters to bounty-hunt have been packed in that you might feel helplessly overwhelmed – seriously, the game's manual warns you on page one to try not to get lost. However, unlike in Level 5's previous effort, *Dark Chronicle*, the game is not bogged down with video demos, pop-up help messages or system quirks. Leashed by Square Enix, Level 5 has grown up to be a good dog. Everything is as it should be. Dungeons achieve a *Zelda*-like aura of depth and complexity. Emerging from one victorious feels oddly like winning a Sunday morning football match with friends and facing the road to the pub.

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IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

FLAT-OUT GORGEOUS: If you thought *Dragon Quest VII* was ugly, you may restore your faith now.

FIELDWORK: Japanese RPGs have used *Dragon Quest*'s field map model for ages. This is the update.

The high difficulty might turn some players off. Die and you might need to sell your weapons and armour to revive dead party members. Keep your wits about you, though, and it gets easier to stay afloat. The game cannot, in fact, be lost at any rate (a parenthetical boo to the Ruura spell, which lets you hop back to towns if you get lost; it kills the immersion for game purists while keeping with continuity for *Dragon Quest* purists). For the first time in the series' beleaguered overseas history, this game is going to hook westerners long enough to draw them past the insane difficulty and into one of the more rewarding, player-loving games of the last decade.



VERDICT 9/10
ONE FOR THE AGES

FAQs

Q. WHY NO VOICE-ACTING?
Part of a scheme to maintain nostalgia. There will probably be voices next time. Reading aloud is fun, anyway.

Q. HOW OLD-SCHOOL?
We're talking 'blank-notes-pages-in-the-back-of-the-manual-that-you'll-actually-use' old-school.

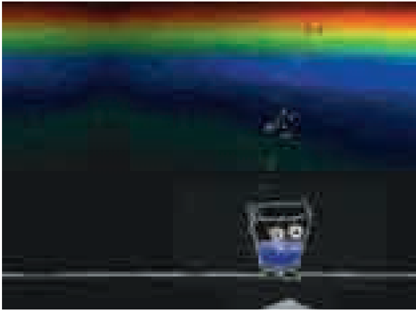
Q. SWEEPING ORCHESTRAL SCORE?
Mostly. Koichi Sugiyama is showing his (very old) age. They should get Yasunori Mitsuda for the next one…





Turn the reel to pull in the fish; sounds easy enough. Of course, he grows more wary of the bait as the levels progress.

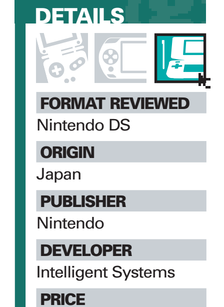




Rubbing, blowing, tapping, drawing…it's all very clever, yet somehow we miss the days of the D-pad and A button.







FORMAT REVIEWED
Nintendo DS

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Intelligent Systems

PRICE
¥4,800

RELEASE
TBA '05 (Japan: Out Now, US: 14 Feb)

PLAYERS
1

WARIO HASN'T LOST HIS TOUCH

SAWARU! MADE IN WARIO

There are few situations where fun can be crammed into five seconds – and please, no smutty remarks. The original *Wario Ware*, however, is not just an exception to this rule but is also one of the GBA's most quirky and playable games. So it seems obvious that *Sawaru! Made In Wario* should be a guaranteed killer app – a game that's not only already proved highly addictive, but also demonstrates a host of uses for the handheld.

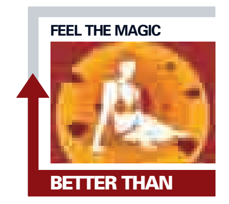
To an extent, the game succeeds on the control front; its 180 bursts of gameplay combine all the pleasure of the GBA game with almost every facet of DS functionality, from scratching, scribbling and tapping on the touch screen to blowing into the mic. Despite this radical change in control, though, the concept is the same; the multitude of characters from the original (and a couple of new faces) all appear with their own batch of mini-games, each of which has to be completed within an increasingly short time limit. Why change what works, eh?

Unfortunately, it's the segregation of the DS's varied uses that concerns us, simply because it removes a huge chunk of the challenge that the GBA game's randomness presented. While the original split games into themed categories you didn't really knew what was coming next – hence the initial panic as you tried to put realisation into physical action with the D-pad and A button. With *Sawaru!*, part of that is lost as soon as you choose a category; you'll know that Wario's games require screen tapping, or that Jimmy T's are all about rubbing, so it's just a matter of deciphering how to use each method. Some categories are worse than others; Mike's karaoke stage, with its 'blow on the mic at the right time' gameplay, barely requires you to put your brain in gear.

That's not to say that this isn't as addictive as it ever was; indeed, choosing Random mode throws the GBA version's charm back into the mix with the challenging new control methods. But with the unique interface proving both innovative and obstructive, a bit of the original's spark has been lost in translation.

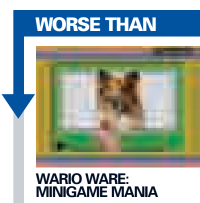
VERDICT 7/10
INNOVATIVE AND LIMITED AT THE SAME TIME

FEEL THE MAGIC



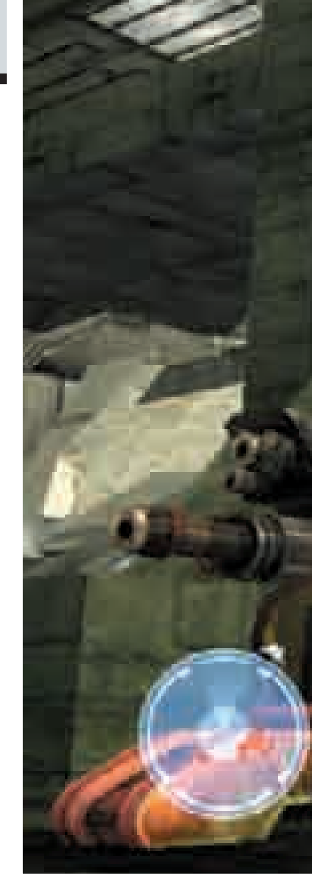
BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



WARIO WARE: MINIGAME MANIA


eMag



MECHASSAULT 2: LONE WOLF

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
Microsoft

DEVELOPER
Day 1

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
January '05
(US: Out now)

PLAYERS
1-16

MECH LOVE AND WAR

Genuinely decent mech games are inherently difficult to create. By their very nature mechs are slow, cumbersome and, generally speaking, devoid of any inspiration. In fact, most mech games fast degenerate into toe-to-toe shooters – missiles fly back and forth, chain guns spew and eventually one mech falls, only to be replaced by another target. Surprisingly, *MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf* does manage to break out of this formula, but not to any great extent.

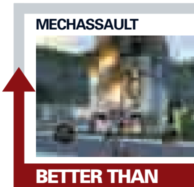
If you've played the previous game you can file this under 'more of the same'. The mech movement (although good) feels almost identical, as does the mission structure and the tasks you're required to perform to progress. Not that this is in any way a slight on the game – after all, the first *MechAssault* made for quite an enjoyable experience, something the developer has tried to build upon by adding new features to bulk out the core gameplay. And these are features the large FASA/*MechWarrior* fan base is going to be very happy to see.

The biggest addition to the gameplay comes with the inclusion of BattleArmor suits. On many of the missions you'll start without a MechWarrior to stomp around in. Instead you'll begin with a metal shell that wraps around your human form. This features a basic explosive weapon as well as a rudimentary laser, which (like the other weapons in the game) can be upgraded with pick-ups. It doesn't pose any real physical threat to anything else in the game so to begin with it can feel like you've been dealt a bad hand. But that's only until you start to use the Claw…

Combined with the Jump Jet the Claw allows you to clamber up the side of buildings or, more importantly, attach yourself to enemy MechWarriors. Once attached you can hack into that mech by way of a cheesy 'Simon says'-style game where success is rewarded with deactivation and a free toy for you to use. All that remains then is for you to slide out of your suit and climb into the mech. There is one major problem with this system: in battle there's no point trying this manoeuvre because as soon as you strip down to your human form you're left defenceless. You'll find, especially on the later levels, that you'll only risk this delicate operation if the area is clear or if the mission objective demands it – which is a shame since it's such a nice feature. However, we can imagine this receiving a lot of cheeky abuse in the multiplayer mode, an area where this game is sure to excel.

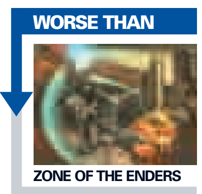
The previous game soon hit monotony in single-player, but on Xbox Live it was a different story. *Lone Wolf* already looks to be heading the same way, perhaps more so since the ability to leave your mech behind opens up many more

MECHASSAULT



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



ZONE OF THE ENDERS

■ The tank is incredibly easy to control and is actually faster than most mechs.

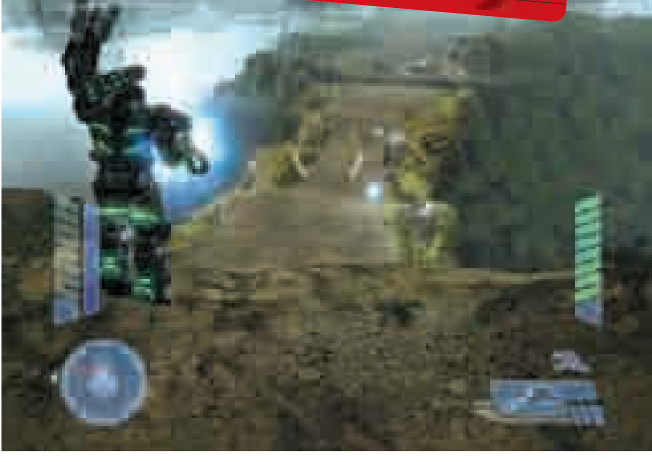




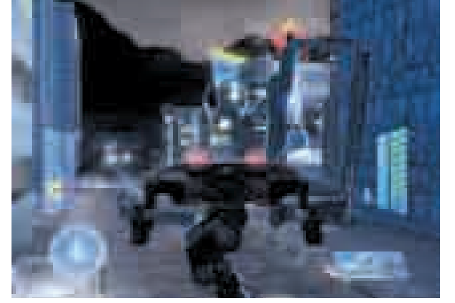


When you're on foot you start to appreciate just how big the mechs are.

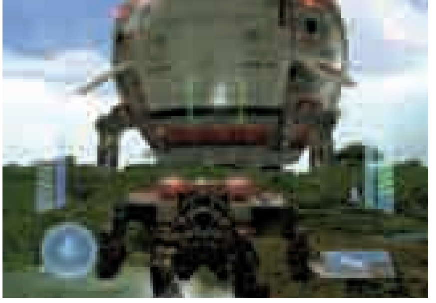




As well as mech hacking the Claw can be used for hanging onto friendly craft.



We doubt those pretty explosions will broaden *Lone Wolf*'s appeal.



Well, it *is* bigger than you, but you *are* in a huge metal suit…

options than hacking. When on foot in BattleArmor you can attach yourself to dropships to get a better view of the battlefield and jump into tanks, which are not only fun to play with in multiplayer but they also add some much-needed variety to the single-player game. You're still just blowing stuff up, but then you wouldn't really expect anything less from a shooter like *MechAssault* (as we said earlier, it's inherently difficult to be original in a mech game – explosions and gunfire are the bread and butter). The destruction is, yet again, a stand-out feature of this game. Buildings can be toppled with some satisfying effects and plant life crumpled underfoot – in fact, there are few areas in this game that cannot be completely levelled.

This cathartic ruination is a lot more appealing in *Lone Wolf*, not because of the increased detail in the destruction process but because of the improved sense of scale in the game. The fact that you can now climb out of your mech gives you a great feeling of power – these are no longer toys messing around in a sandbox environment, these are hulking great pieces of metal that command all that they survey. Fans of the *MechWarrior* series that this game follows will know exactly what we're talking about here. It's this sense of power that's the most appealing feature of *MechAssault 2*. Unfortunately, it's also this feature that many gamers simply don't get. It doesn't matter how many explosions or missiles you cram into a mech game, it will still remain a product for a niche audience. *MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf* may have more to appeal to the mainstream gaming community than the average title in the genre but it's still a mech game.



LIVE ASSAULT

As with its predecessor, the online side of *MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf* is where the true entertainment lies. There are ten different game modes covering everything from the usual deathmatch-style games to co-operative survival missions. There are also plenty of new tactics that can be employed thanks to the addition of new mechs, tanks, the BattleArmor and the VTOL craft (the latter allow you to take a more commanding position of the battlefield in team games as you fly in supplies to friendly mechs fighting on the floor). All of these are going to become essential when you start to get to grips with the Conquest mode, a massively multi-clan game that allows you to take over the universe planet by planet. There's definitely more fun to be had in the multiplayer than there is on your own.

FAQs

Q. WHAT NEW MECHS ARE THERE?
You now have the Blood Asp, Nova Cat, Wendigo, and the Stiletto.

Q. WHAT'S FASA?
The company that created the *BattleTech* series, of which *MechAssault* is one of many mechy spin-offs.

Q. WHAT ABOUT DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT?
The game supports downloads and also includes some of the downloadable mechs from the first game.



Victory in boss battles doesn't require the same level of finger gymnastics as in *Shattered Soldier*.



While the visuals are functional, the explosions are stunning.



Camp characters, bizarre dialogue and squealing guitars certainly give *Neo Contra* a unique atmosphere.

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2 (US)

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Konami

DEVELOPER
KCET

PRICE
$39.99

RELEASE
TBA
(Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1-2

YOU CAN'T TEACH AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS AFTER ALL

NEO CONTRA

If the war cry of modern gamers is that games are too easy, *Contra* contains the battles they're itching to fight. Stubbornly old-school in both its gameplay and belief that high rankings will keep gamers fighting through the seemingly impenetrable flood of enemies, the *Contra* series currently sits on the outskirts of next-gen gaming with niche appeal. For *Neo Contra*, however, it appears that in trying to move towards mainstream demands for a more welcoming difficulty curve, Konami has shot itself in the foot.

The most obvious change is that *Neo Contra* shuns side scrolling for top-down shooting. There's more freedom to weave in and out of the onslaught of bullets and, as a result, the game is easier than you might expect – the frustration that arose from continuous dying is no longer present. However, any let-up in difficulty is negated by the controls. As clamping down on the shoulder buttons locks direction or movement, you first have to jink the way you wish to face, which leaves your character constantly stuttering back and forth. It's an adequate, if clunky, control scheme but later levels prove that adequate isn't good enough.

The biggest sacrifice in the makeover, despite the trademark boss battles and rock-guitar squealing remaining intact, is the excitement. The screen never fills up the way previous *Contra* titles did and the feeling of trying to find any narrow window of opportunity to delay an inevitable death never presents itself. That the challenge comes from battling the controls rather than the on-screen hordes is a sign that something's gone wrong. However, as the new weapons system and two-player mode salvage some pride, there's still a nostalgic enjoyment in the plot-light, boss-heavy structure.

But that's not enough. *Neo Contra* has corrected a few of *Shattered Soldier*'s problems (the weapons are balanced and the difficulty's toned down) but a few new ones have crept in too. The *Contra* series has reached an interesting crossroads, where it needs to bring in new audiences to survive as its loyal fanbase slowly wilts away. *Neo Contra* sees the series willing to move into a brave new world, but on this evidence it hasn't put its best foot forward.

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IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL
FREEDOM OF CHOICE: You're no longer restricted to left, right and jump, thanks to the top-down view.
WEAPON OF CHOICE: There are three different weapon schemes to choose from before setting off.



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, STILL BROKEN

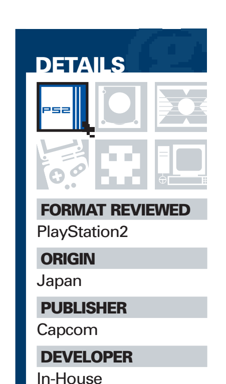





eMag

BLOOD-HAPPY GLADIATORS, PLEASE FORM AN ORDERLY QUEUE

SHADOW OF ROME



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Capcom

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
February '05

PLAYERS
1

If you want to take an obvious reference point from Hollywood, then *Shadow Of Rome* is clearly the digital equivalent of *Gladiator*. Theatrical, dramatic and spectacular, *Shadow Of Rome* thrives on being big; big with its combat, big with its drama and even big with its plot. The story could easily have descended into hokum clichés given how the grandiose nature of the combat threatens to eclipse everything else, but the plot holds the game together surprisingly well. Battle-weary Agrippa returns to Rome to find his father, Vipsanius, is wrongly accused of Julius Caesar's murder while the naive Octavianus tries to uncover the truth. Given how limited the idea of a *Gladiator*-alike game sounds, this plot manages to uncover all the buried potential, switching between the protagonists and even using a clever flashback sequence to ensure *Shadow Of Rome* isn't limited to the circular walls of the gladiatorial arena.

Capcom has also had fun tailoring the combat system to reflect the brutal nature of ancient Roman combat. Chase a fallen opponent and he'll throw sand in your eyes; crack combatants' armour apart and you can do real damage to the exposed body; use your weapon too much and it'll break, leaving you scrabbling to wrest an enemy's axe out of his grasp. Fighting can be clumsy but it never becomes messy and there's a neatly balanced risk and reward dynamic at work when engaging the longer attack animations. *Shadow Of Rome* is also over-the-top with its blood and gore, allowing you to hack off limbs or, quite literally, smash heads to pieces. This comic-book gore slots perfectly into the brutal atmosphere and there's a guilty pleasure in getting your hands on the massive mace or halberd and then slicing both arms off an opponent before chasing him around the arena.

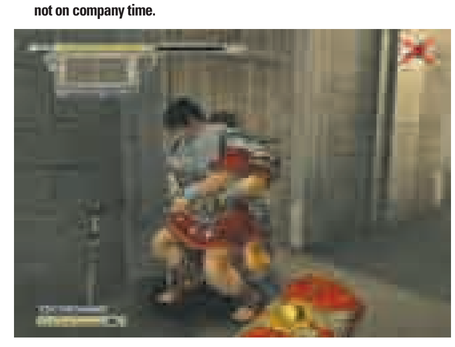
While gleefully replicating the drama and bloody battles of its big-screen cues, *Shadow Of Rome* somehow avoids repetition. Capcom has managed to make each battle slightly different so you can be fighting through an enemy fort alone with Agrippa or taking part in a huge winner-takes-all battle royale in the arena. You've got to please the crowd too, building up salvos until you can salute the crowd, who'll throw a better weapon your way. There's a combo counter that needs monitoring so you can keep track of how many salvos you're building up while rankings provide the scores to beat. Given that you can really feel the damage dealt by the bigger weapons thanks to hulking animations and squeamish sound effects, it's a task you'll be more than happy to take up.

Sadly, and typically for a Capcom game, *Shadow Of Rome* is linear. Where the stifling corridors contributed to *Resident Evil*'s atmosphere, and tight environments gave Dante a foothold to pirouette and twist past his enemies, *Shadow Of*

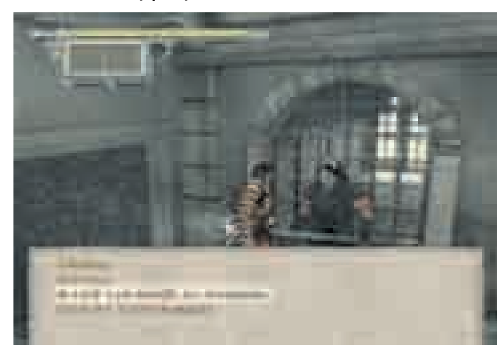


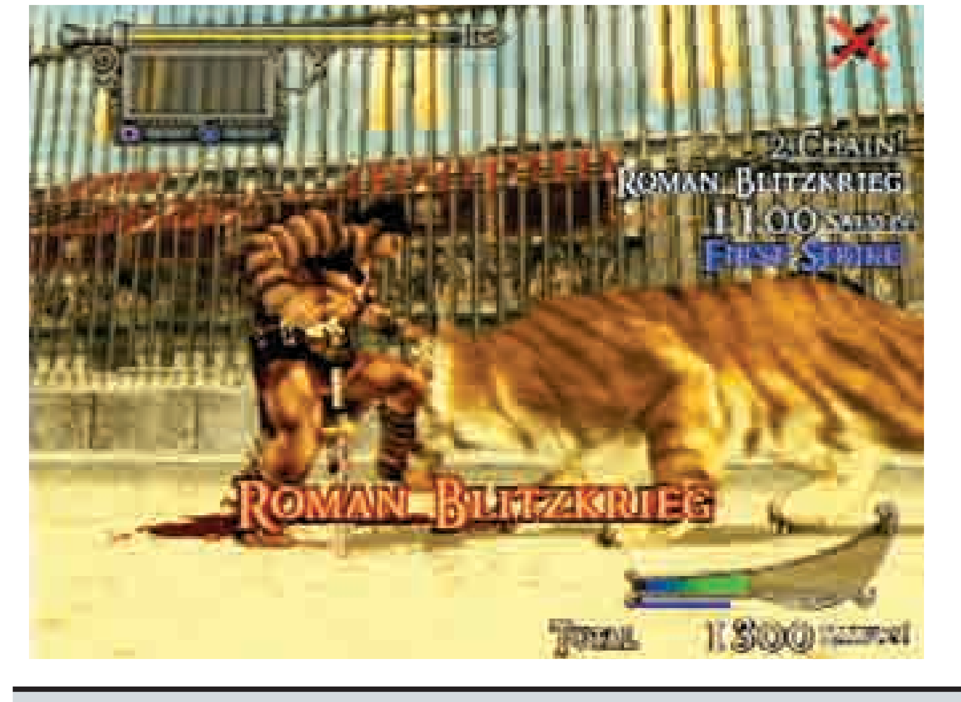
The tigers mark the height of *Shadow Of Rome*'s gladiators-by-numbers phase.

Whatever you like, lads, but not on company time.



Choose no weapons and you'll be a real man but you'll also be really dead really quickly.







Rome doesn't know how to turn this flaw to its advantage. The lumbering, clubbing nature of the combat quickly becomes plodding as you strive to work through enemies as quickly as possible rather than enjoying fights to their fullest and there's little to break them up. Bosses and the occasional set-piece provide welcome relief but there really needed to be more of those. While leaving the dusty gladiatorial arenas should give the game a chance to breathe, *Shadow Of Rome* simply gets a change of scenery, as you end up being funnelled through winding forests or narrow streets instead. In this case, all roads really do lead to Rome.

But the linearity doesn't aggravate as much as Capcom's willingness to dilute the spotlight on combat. The obligatory stealth sections are here as the wimpy Octavianus is forced to sneak rather than fight. They're a reminder of why stealth is best done well or not at all as this is the only part of the game that exposes the camera as unreliable, not to mention the trial and error guesswork involved in advancing through these sections. Worse still are the adventure scenes, where the game grinds to a halt while Octavianus is forced to trudge through Rome trying to find the right person to talk to, just so the game stirs into life again. Given that all NPCs trot out a few lines of flat dialogue, the illusion of freedom quickly evaporates and this part of the game turns into a chore. If these sections were added because Capcom didn't have enough faith in keeping the combat fresh then the waters have been needlessly muddied. Yet the brutality of the battles is *Shadow Of Rome*'s saviour, ensuring the joys of arena battles outshine the gloom of the needless padding and provide guilty thrills that little else can offer.



GORE TO THE FLOOR

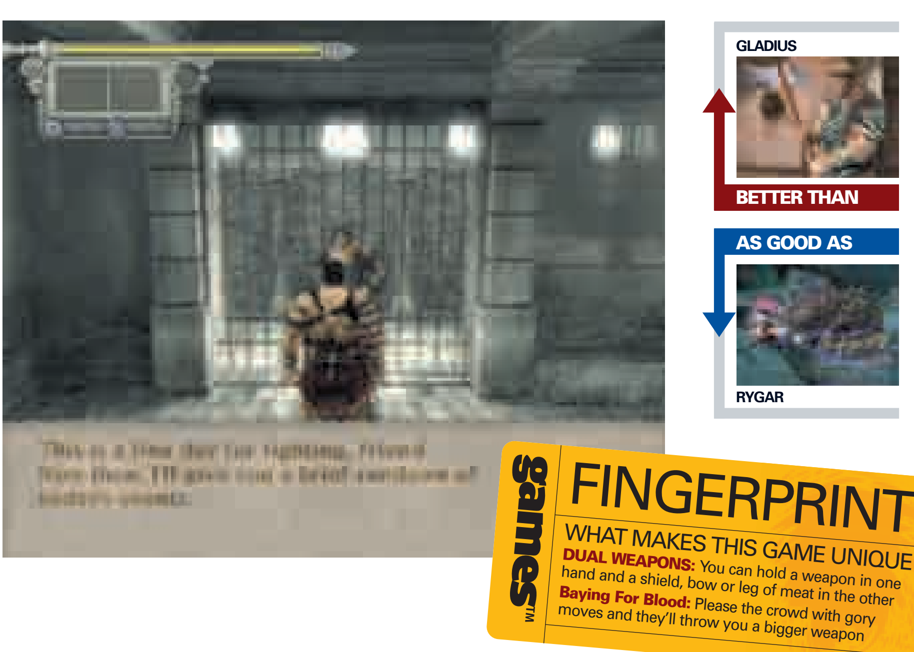
If *Resident Evil 4* showed Capcom was stepping up a gear in the gore stakes, *Shadow Of Rome* is the ace in its deck. Bodies can be sliced in half and the legs temporarily stay upright, spurting blood. Appropriately, this move is known as Red Volcano. Perhaps even more sadistic is the move called Juicy Tomato, where you cave an opponent's head in using a blunt weapon and it explodes in a shower of blood. Yet these manouvres never feel like shock tactics for the sake of it and provide plenty of gratuitous entertainment. Indeed, the biggest thrill of the game is spotting a huge weapon and getting there before everyone else, knowing the havoc you can start unleashing.

FAQs

Q. STORY?
It begins at the end then rewinds to the start. It's less confusing than it sounds.

Q. GORY?
Whether it's hacking bodies in half or throwing axes into backs, *Shadow Of Rome* loves its blood.

Q. GLORY?
Hit the attack buttons together and Agrippa will salute the crowd in exchange for a bigger, better weapon.



GLADIUS

BETTER THAN

AS GOOD AS

RYGAR

games™ FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DUAL WEAPONS: You can hold a weapon in one hand and a shield, bow or leg of meat in the other

Baying For Blood: Please the crowd with gory moves and they'll throw you a bigger weapon



VERDICT 7/10

MUDDLED IDENTITY SAVED BY BRILLIANT COMBAT


eMag



Like previous games in the franchise, it's possible to select a tune to race to before you start.



There's a natty selection of cars to take for a spin, with the obligatory unlockable models as well.



There's plenty to gawp at as you race around the impressively drawn tracks, just make sure you concentrate on the racing.

RIDGE RACER DS

A FOUR-YEAR OLD PORT WITH NO EXTRAS – NOW THAT'S INNOVATION

games™ FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
ONE CART FITS ALL: *Ridge Racer DS* allows an impressive six racers to play off one cartridge.
TOUCH ME: The ability to play via the stylus is unique but utterly pointless.

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Nintendo DS
ORIGIN
US
PUBLISHER
Namco
DEVELOPER
NST
PRICE
$29.99
RELEASE
TBA (US: Out Now)
PLAYERS
1-6

***R**idge Racer DS* **could represent the start of a worrying trend for DS titles.** If developers plan to release N64 games for Nintendo's new machine, it wouldn't hurt to actually improve on the original titles or, better yet, add new content as Nintendo managed with *Super Mario 64 DS*. While *Ridge Racer DS* is a more than competent racer, NST could have done so much more with it.

Everything seems promising enough at first thanks to some slick presentation that includes well laid-out menus and uncluttered dual screens. Once you begin to race, though, the illusion of quality created by the impressive front end begins to peel away and reveals that *Ridge Racer DS* is little more than an above-average racer that's starting to look rather old. The most obvious problems stem from the game's three control methods. Although both the D-pad and – after much practice – the thumb strap work to a point, neither is any substitute for the analogue control of the original game. You shouldn't even consider trying to play with the stylus, as cornering becomes practically impossible.

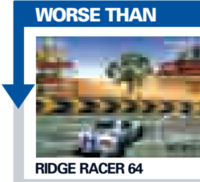
Thanks to the twitchy controls you'll find yourself continually slamming into the sides of each well-designed track while your unhindered opponents tear past you. Although *Ridge Racer DS* gets better with practice, you never really feel like you're in perfect control of your car. It's a problem that becomes even more apparent when you consider the sometimes questionable collision detection that sees you hitting cars you thought you had safely passed. These niggles are a real shame, as this is still an enjoyable experience and does deliver some excellent races thanks to its superb track design, challenging opponents and fantastic multiplayer mode. The drifting is as good as ever and the solid frame rate delivers a decent sensation of speed (which is further enhanced by some funky techno tunes). However, we still can't help feeling a little short-changed, especially after playing the excellent *Ridge Racers* on Sony's PSP.

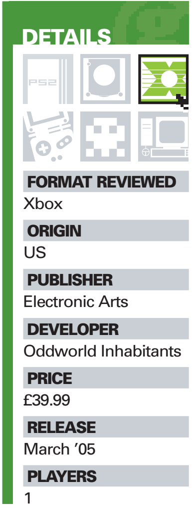
By trying so hard to justify exciting new uses for the DS's touch screen, NST has forgotten such crucial elements as a rear view mirror or the ability to track your opponents on each map. Nintendo prides the DS on its ability to deliver unique gameplay experiences over its rivals; as far as *Ridge Racer DS* is concerned, though, its innovative control method is just an unnecessary gimmick.

VERDICT 6/10
FUN, BUT LET DOWN BY SEVERAL ANNOYING FLAWS

URBAN ASPHALT GT

BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

RIDGE RACER 64



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER
Oddworld Inhabitants

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
March '05

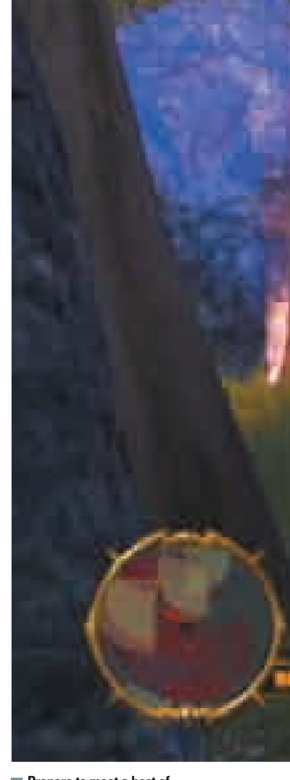
PLAYERS
1

IT'S AN ODDWORLD AFTER ALL

ODDWORLD: STRANGER'S WRATH

The oddest thing about Oddworld is that it's really not that odd any more. After working our way through two *Oddysees* and an *Exoddus* we're actually starting to recognise and accept the freeform world in which Abe, Munch and their selection of peculiar pals reside – and it's a world of which we're becoming increasingly fond. Many a time we've wished to go toe-to-toe with a Glukkon; stumbling upon a Fuzzle on the way to work would make our entire week; and slig, slog and slur are among the many words we'll be teaching our kids to be wary of – we really are a strange bunch.

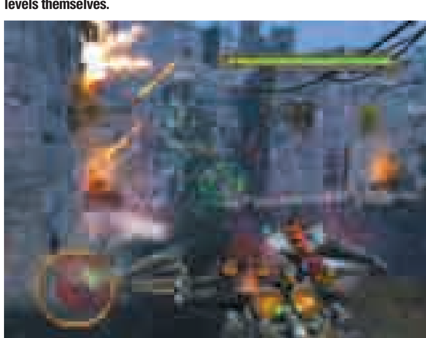
The beauty of these *Oddworld* games is that you never really know what to expect. Not in a gameplay sense – a quick glace at the screenshots on the back of the box will soon reveal what form the game will take. Rather it's the characters, locations and overall visuals that will always catch you out, tempt you to believe that the place you're looking at is perhaps just a few miles north of your home, and prompt you to wonder how on earth Oddworld Inhabitants managed to conjure up a beautifully insane world while the rest of us were merely unsuccessfully attempting to think of something mildly more interesting than jam to put on our toast.



Prepare to meet a host of weird and wonderful enemies – these kamikaze guys are a blast.



Finding your way between the areas is almost as challenging as the levels themselves.



The general rule is the bigger the arena, the bigger the boss. This guy's gonna be huge…



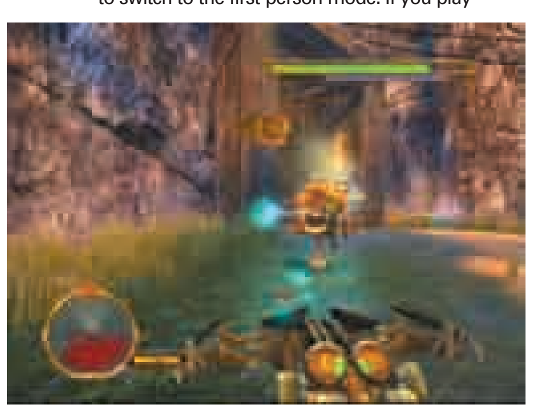




"THE GAMEPLAY MAY SOUND LIKE A WESTERN, BUT THAT'S PERFECT BECAUSE MUCH OF THE GAME LOOKS LIKE A WESTERN AS WELL"

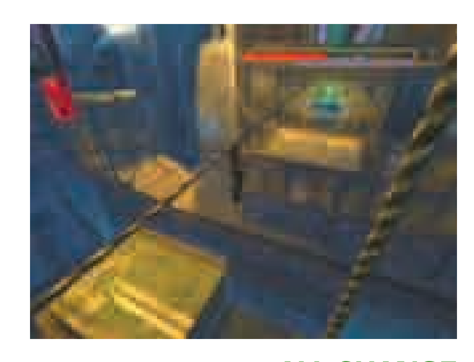
The first thing you'll notice as *Stranger's Wrath* fires up is that apart from the feel of the title and the characters it contains, it has very little in common with any of its forerunners. Taking control of Stranger you'll wander from town to town (each containing more panic-stricken hen-folk than the last), rounding up all the criminals that are making life difficult for the inhabitants. It's a case of hunting down the local Bounty Store, picking your next target and then tracking down him/her/it in exchange for the cash on offer. Yes, it sounds like a western, but that's perfect because a large section of the game looks like a western as well. It may be a slightly weird western, but for sheer style and playability it casts a large, strangely shaped shadow over titles such as *Red Dead Revolver* and *Dead Man's Hand*.

The game also comes in the increasingly popular action/FPS form with running, climbing and exploring all presented in third-person while all the gun-slinging showdowns require the player to switch to the first-person mode. If you play anything like we do, you'll be spending roughly 75 per cent of the game in first-person as although stealth is a very real option during many stages it's far too much fun blasting down lizard cowboys with the array of weapons that you have available (but there'll be more about those later). With the action being so frequent and intense, *Stranger's Wrath* has more in common with the likes of *Halo 2* and *Metroid Prime 2* than its fellow *Oddworld* titles, and while these are games no-one really wants to be competing with, *Stranger's Wrath* has had a good go and is actually not far off being superior to both.



The game owes much of its appeal to its impressive visuals. We're not just talking about a few pretty backgrounds here, it's a full-on treat for the eyeballs and each and every section – whether you're in a dusty town that's littered with tumbleweed or passing through a frozen cavern in your boat – is guaranteed to draw nods of approval from any spectators you may have attracted. And these nods are likely to turn into rapturous applause when the FMV arrives. We'd struggle to think of a developer that does better-quality FMV than Oddworld Inhabitants; we've seen tangible, real-life things that don't look as convincing as some of the clips in this game.

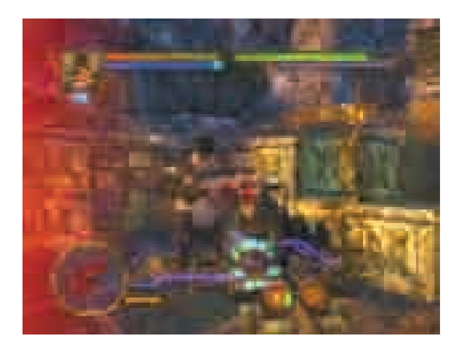
As we mentioned, *Stranger's Wrath*'s arsenal should prove to be another key selling point as it's one of the things that sets the game apart from every other FPS/action title we've seen. We've all run around various facilities desperately trying to find an SMG or grenade launcher to replace the ineffective default pistol that you always seem to be grasping at the start of your average FPS. Sure, there are games out there that have attempted to ▷

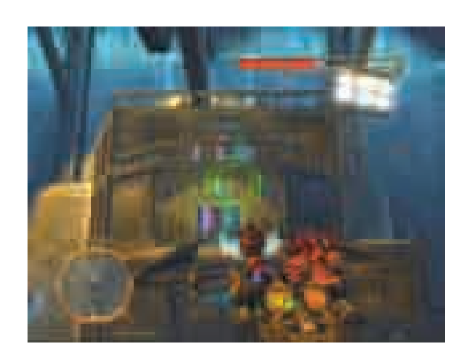


ALL CHANGE

Although you may feel as if you're getting the hang of the way things are done after a fair bit of time playing *Stranger's Wrath*, don't get too comfy. When you reach the halfway point things will change drastically and you'll uncover the answers to many questions that have cropped up during the course of game; you'll find out why Stranger needs his operation so badly and why he's such a grizzly character in the first place, for instance. More importantly, this halfway point marks a change in direction for the game. New moves will become available as well as an improved story and plenty of new challenges. The secrets were kept from us for a fair while so we're not going to be the ones who ruin it for you, but we liked it when we found out. Ooh, we can feel your curiosity burning brightly.







"THE PARADE OF BIZARRE WEAPONRY PROVIDES STRANGER'S WRATH WITH A CHARM THAT'S BOUND TO TURN PLAYERS INTO ADDICTS"

introduce new, more powerful weaponry, but even making a dash for the one and only Power Sword in an arena gets tiresome after a while. No, we want real innovation. Firing a tiny spider at a foe and then watching with glee as it incapacitates him by scuttling around and webbing him up – imagine the wonder of that.

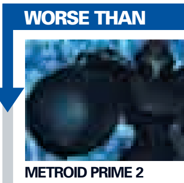
It's this environmental variety of crossbow ammo that you can expect to find in *Stranger's Wrath*: TNT-covered bats that flap towards their target, rabid Fuzzles that lie in wait for something to sink their teeth into, and skunks that force everyone in the vicinity to start spectacularly vomiting – it's a parade of bizarre weaponry that wouldn't really work in any other series but provides this game with a charm that's bound to turn players into addicts. Being a bounty hunter who lives off the land means you'll also have to catch your ammo before heading into any dangerous situation and – in the first half of the game at least – this creature capturing feature will force you to keep your eyes peeled for possible nests and burrows that you can use to replenish your dwindling supply of bugs before you enter the next grand firefight.

Okay, *Stranger's Wrath* isn't perfect. Stranger's ridiculously low voice means you'll occasionally miss valuable pieces of information unless your TV is turned up to 11 and there are times when it's not entirely clear where you're

RED DEAD REVOLVER

BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



METROID PRIME 2



games™

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ONE MAN ARMY: It's unlikely you'll ever find a weapon set as great as this. Ever.

LET'S TWIST: The kink in the tale at the halfway point is one of the best we've seen.



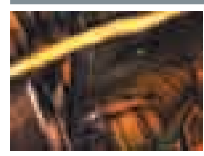
Even when riding a mine cart Stranger is a force to be reckoned with. And that loaded crossbow will probably get bounties running scared too.



TIMELINE HI-LIGHTS

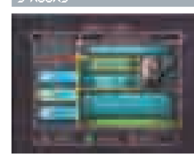
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

15 MINUTES



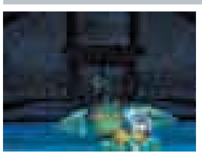
You'll probably have watched the intro movie a good few times by now. It's amazing. You should also have the controls sorted thanks to the simple tutorial.

3 HOURS



At least one town should be free of villains but there are plenty more for you to tackle. If you know what you're doing you should be close to a full rack of basic ammo too.

3 DAYS



The game will have shifted up a gear at this stage. Advanced ammo will be making life more fun and that secret will be getting pretty close by now. Can you tell what it is yet?



If you keep an eye out you can find ways through the levels that require much less firepower.



Go in search of more 'live' ammo to fill that gap on your crossbow. Then unleash very strange hell.

meant to be heading. None of these things can take anything away from the game, though, and perhaps the only significant element missing from *Stranger's Wrath* is a multiplayer mode. We say 'perhaps' because it would have only mattered had Oddworld Inhabitants dedicated a similar amount of time to it as the rest of the game. In many ways, no multiplayer at all is infinitely preferable to a hurriedly bolted-on farce (the likes of which we've recently seen in *Metroid Prime 2*) and we are happy to accept *Stranger's Wrath* for exactly what it is – a superb action FPS and a credit to an already brilliant series.



VERDICT 9/10
ODDLY INCREDIBLE

YOU SPIN ME RIGHT ROUND, BABY…

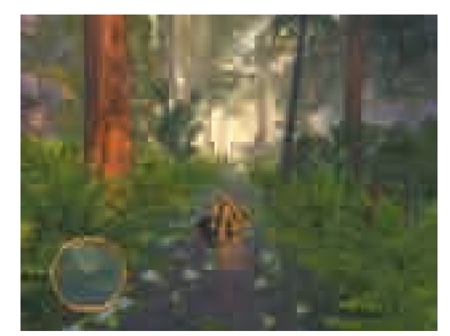
As you battle with your chosen bounty you'll have to decide whether you want to take them dead or alive. Taking a foe alive takes much more effort as you'll need to wear down their endurance using electric bugs and melee attacks before you can capture them. As the game goes on this becomes progressively harder. There's a certain way to take each enemy alive, though, and you'll only receive the maximum amount of dough available if you spend the time figuring out the best way to do this. Of course, if you're not a money-driven kind of person then you can just kill them in whatever way you see fit. We found that an exploding bat in the face is a good way to go.

FAQs

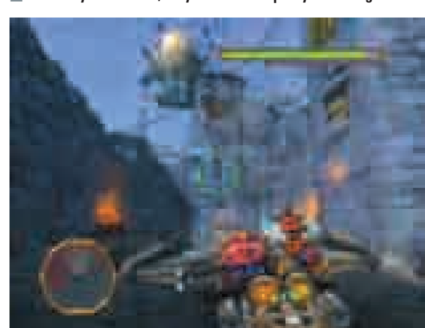
Q. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?
It's tough, but if you're persistent then you won't have too much trouble.

Q. WHAT ABOUT REPLAYABILITY?
Except to look at how pretty it is again there's not much else to do, unfortunately.

Q. SO NO MULTIPLAYER?
No. But that's not necessarily a bad thing.



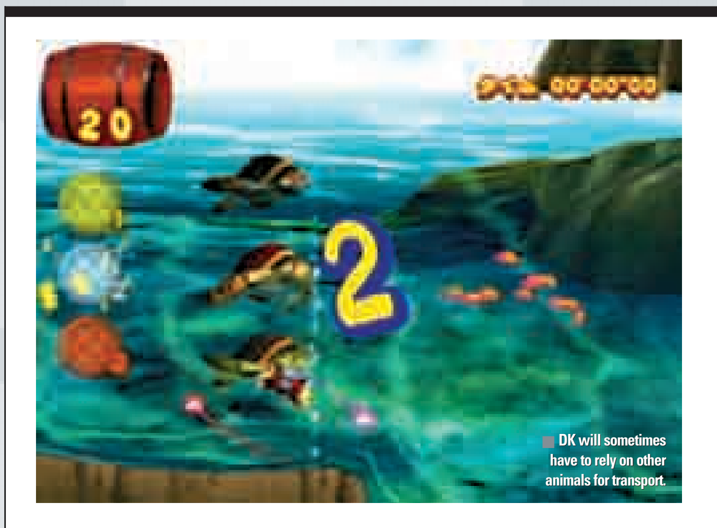
It's hardly *Snake Eater*, but you'll still have plenty of tracking to do.



It's hardly *Snake Eater*, but you'll still have plenty of tracking to do.



There's no time to admire the view – there are bounties waiting for you out there.


DK will sometimes have to rely on other animals for transport.


Boss battles take the form of fully 3D beat-'em-ups.

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
GameCube

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
4 February '05 (Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1

NINTENDO GIVES US SOME SKIN

DONKEY KONG: JUNGLE BEAT

The line between innovation and self-indulgence is a fine one, and Nintendo usually manages to stay on the right side of it. Or at least it did until it announced at E3 '04 that its next game would be a platformer controlled using bongos. Starring Donkey Kong. Yet we're pleased to report that this does actually work. In many ways *Jungle Beat* is a continuation of the *Donkey Kong Country* series. Forget about *Donkey Kong 64* and this is actually the franchise's first proper foray into 3D. How ironic, then, that it retains the same traditional 2D gameplay.

Shockingly, the storyline takes a departure from the norm of 'hot damn, DK's bananas have been nabbed again'; this time the world's magical fruits have been hijacked and it's your job to free them from the hands of darkness – in other words, a bunch of evil elephant, warthog and ape bosses. Bananas do play an integral part of the game, though, as they form DK's energy bar. Get a knock and you'll lose a few bananas, your banana tally determining what award you receive at the end of the level (with each stage only becoming playable once you have enough medals).

So far so platformy, but what makes the game stand out is the control system. Tapping left makes you move left and vice versa. The faster you tap, the faster you move. Tapping both bongos will make you jump, and clapping makes you grab or slap. It really is that simple, but it works so effectively. You could argue that a regular controller would work as well, but the gameplay has been tailored around rhythm and button bashing, the likes of which are perfectly suited to the bongos.

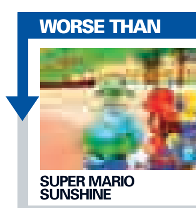
Jungle Beat is a breath of fresh air and a welcome return to the genre. Though the platforming doesn't push any boundaries and the game is rather short, it will put a smile on your face and remind you that perhaps Nintendo does know best after all.

games™ FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
BONGO JUMPS: Use the bongo peripheral to make DK jump and attack.
2D AND 3D: Two-dimensional platforming is mixed in with fully 3D boss battles.

If only life was as simple as collecting bananas and munching fruit.



BETTER THAN
WARIO WORLD


WORSE THAN
SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE


VERDICT 7/10
NOVEL AND FUN ADDITION TO THE DK SERIES


eMag

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Koei

DEVELOPER
Nippon Ichi

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
February '04

PLAYERS
1

PHANTOM BRAVE

"STRANGE LITTLE GIRL, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

In the last few years, we appear to have witnessed the rise of the super-developer, a new breed of game creator that doesn't seem to put a foot wrong. Intelligent Systems, for instance, has continued its reign of development supremacy while firms like Pandemic and Harmonix have really made their mark. Among the pack is Japanese RPG star Nippon Ichi, whose games have only recently made it to Europe but who has already built quite a following across a surprisingly large cross section of gamers. And it doesn't look like it's going to be disappointing us any time soon, either.

Phantom Brave starts by sticking its tongue out at strategy RPG conventions and tossing the traditional grid system aside, instead opting for free movement determined by a set number of points. While this does open up the play fields to much more strategic potential, it means even veterans will have to learn the game anew and can sometimes make setting up attacks and moves a time-consuming process. But given the amount of time you'll need to invest in order to make anything resembling progress, this pales into insignificance; before long you'll be steaming through the menus and perfectly judging attacks and knock-outs.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FREEDOM: The fact there's no grid means you can move wherever you like…
CLOSE ENOUGH?: …But it can make judging attack distances and suchlike a little tricky.

The whole battle system is similarly original, requiring you to summon allies from objects around each stage. These origins directly affect the stats and abilities of your Phantoms, bringing still more strategy to an already cerebral experience, and once you start learning how to best use the attack and defence bonuses granted by sticking with certain objects, you'll discover depth and potential far beyond what is initially apparent. And it's this that will keep you hooked on Nippon Ichi's latest for many months to come.



But like *La Pucelle, Phantom Brave* doesn't quite have the same immediacy and allure as its Prinny-filled predecessor. Sure, it's a great little game in its own right, but given the sheer time investment required to really do it justice only the truly committed will ever discover the deeper joys and wonderful complexities of the game. Then again, only the truly committed will give *Phantom Brave* a second look between higher profile titles. *That's* the real shame.



VERDICT 8/10
ANOTHER FEATHER IN NIPPON ICHI'S CAP

FUTURE TACTICS: THE UPRISING



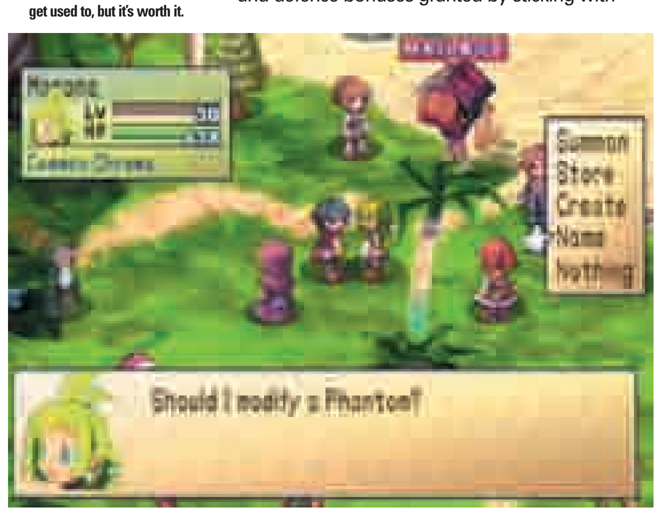


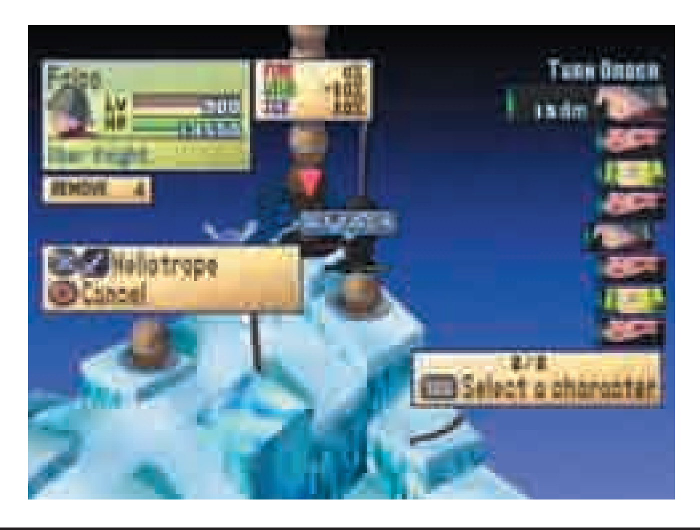
WORSE THAN

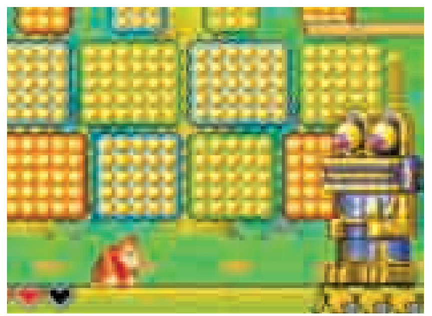


DISGAEA: HOUR OF DARKNESS

■ There's a lot here that even RPG fanatics may need to get used to, but it's worth it.





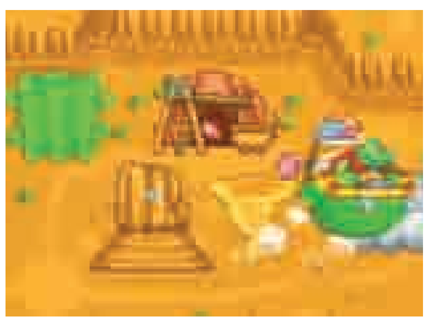




Banana reserves can be used to top up DK's energy meter.



He hasn't changed his haircut in – what? – a decade?



King Of Swing – when tornados go bad. Very bad.

DK: KING OF SWING

NINTENDO TAKES ITSELF DOWN A PEG

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Game Boy Advance

ORIGIN
Japan

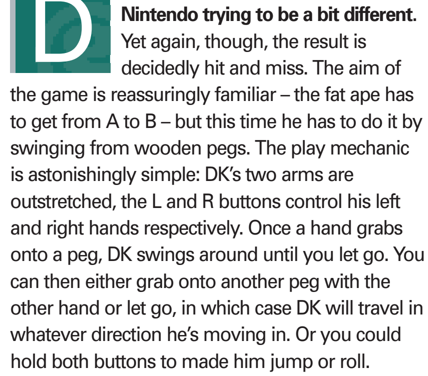
PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£24.99

RELEASE
4 February '05
(Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1



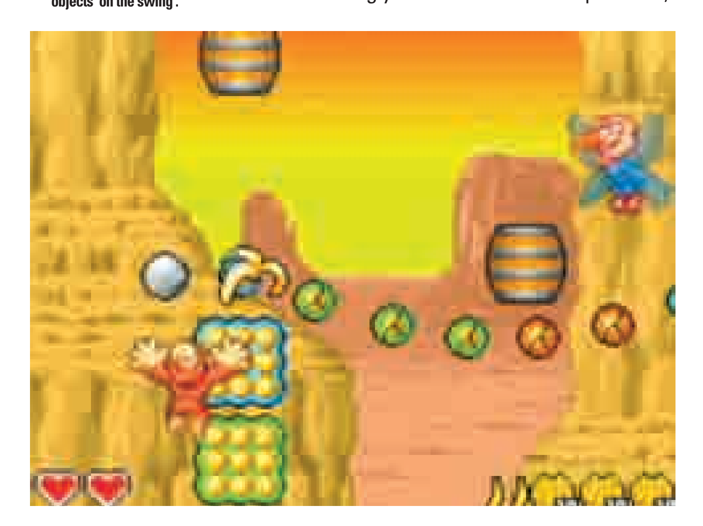
***DK: King Of Swing* is another case of Nintendo trying to be a bit different.** Yet again, though, the result is decidedly hit and miss. The aim of the game is reassuringly familiar – the fat ape has to get from A to B – but this time he has to do it by swinging from wooden pegs. The play mechanic is astonishingly simple: DK's two arms are outstretched, the L and R buttons control his left and right hands respectively. Once a hand grabs onto a peg, DK swings around until you let go. You can then either grab onto another peg with the other hand or let go, in which case DK will travel in whatever direction he's moving in. Or you could hold both buttons to made him jump or roll.

It sounds fairly straightforward, but the gameplay takes a lot of getting used to, which isn't a good thing for a handheld title. Once you get the hang of it, though, you realise that the game's underlying concept really does work. You soon find yourself swinging with ease, grabbing and throwing boulders with pinpoint precision, and launching yourself towards distant platforms, entirely confident that you'll be able to reach them. And then it all goes wrong.

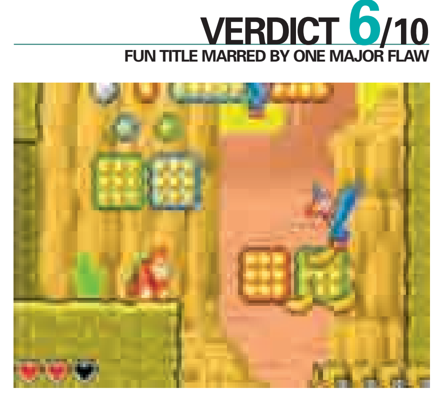
You see, every five or six levels the game ups the difficulty by throwing in the most frustrating levels we've ever seen. One sees you negotiating platforms in the midst of a tornado, which means when you jump you get blown sideways; if you miss a peg you get blown away. The tornado brings you back round eventually, but it seems that when you're travelling at speed it's virtually impossible to grab onto pegs, so you fall all the way to the bottom of the level. To have the basic rules of the gameplay (the grabbing threshold, basically) change so abruptly is criminal. Moreover it's extremely frustrating and makes the game hard for all the wrong reasons. There are several levels like this, which is too many by half; if we weren't determined to finish the game for the sake of a review it's likely we would have given up at this point. It's a shame too because, these levels aside, there's a great little game in there. It's unlike Nintendo to punish gamers for no reason, but this time it's slipped up.

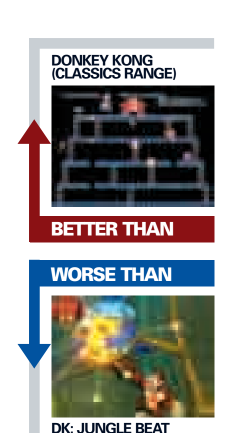
games™ FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
SWINGER ZONE: Swinging from peg to peg takes practice, but you'll get used to it… eventually.
MINIMALIST: You really only need the L and R buttons to play. You don't even touch the D-pad.

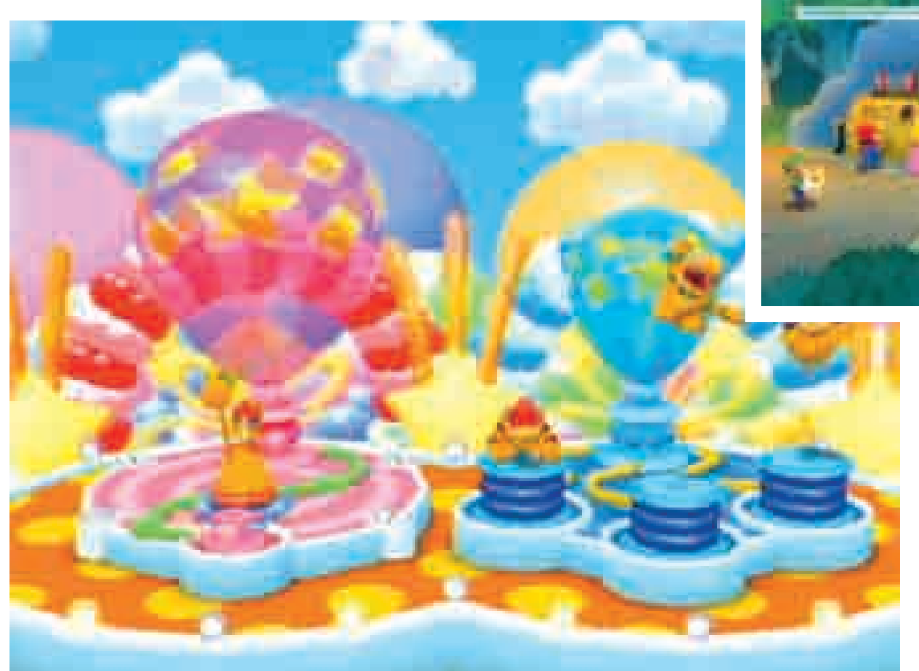
DK can pick up and throw objects 'on the swing'.



VERDICT 6/10
FUN TITLE MARRED BY ONE MAJOR FLAW







Ah, button mashing – the mainstay of any *Mario Party* game. And not surprisingly, there's plenty of finger fitness to be enjoyed here.



The microphone's voice recognition is definitely accurate, although the games that use it aren't exactly fun.

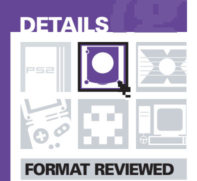


Some games aren't that original – this one's in *Pokémon Colosseum.*

MARIO PARTY 6

NINTENDO INVITES YOU TO GET ON DA MIC

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
GameCube (US)

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Hudsonsoft

PRICE
$49.99

RELEASE
Q1 '05
(Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1-4

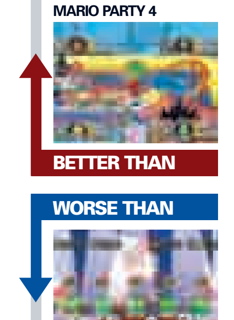
And so here we are again – another *Mario Party*, with pretty much the same objectives as last time thanks to its board-game stylings, insistence on the collection of Stars, Coins and Orbs, and over 70 different mini-games. Are we reaching that point where Nintendo really should think about changing the format radically to ignite some interest again? Perhaps. Of all the *Mario Party* games so far, though, this sixth instalment has received the most attention as far as conceptual tweaks go – changes have been made at the most fundamental levels, making the gameplay different enough to justify the release (on paper, at least).

The introduction of new characters Brighton the Sun and Twila the Moon, for example, has given Hudson the scope to add a day/night system for the main Party mode; rotating every four turns, the shift affects the way that each board operates, such as altering the path players have to take, changing how many Coins the Star costs or even adding completely new elements to the board. Some effort has also gone into alleviating the chore of playing the game alone, with a speed increase for the CPU's actions, the removal of unnecessary set-pieces, and the option to skip computer-only mini-games all being implemented. More specifically for lone *Party*-goers, though, is Solo mode – a simplified game with its own boards that tempts players with the prize of unlocking more mini-games, so long as they're prepared to risk losing all they've earned come the end. Short and to the point, it stands out as a worthy counterpoint to the drawn-out Party mode.

While all this might make *Mario Party 6* sound like the best version of the game yet, we can't help but think that these minor additions (and they are minor, in the grand scheme of things) can't compensate for what is a rather weak line-up of mini-games making up the heart of the action. Feeling somewhat bland against some of its predecessors, *Mario Party 6*'s games come off as lacking in skill, not to mention creativity; the coating may look different, but the core concepts are incredibly repetitive. Even the included microphone, once believed to play a pivotal role in the game, makes up such a small and rather dull part of the gameplay that it's more like a unique selling point instead of a decent innovation. Granted, the game still offers almost as much fun as it ever has, but for those of us who've been to all of Mario's parties it's about time he laid on something new.

games™ FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
SOUND CHECK: The inclusion of a microphone gives *Mario Party 6* the supposed edge over its predecessors, although the fact that only a few mini-games use it makes you wonder why it's there.

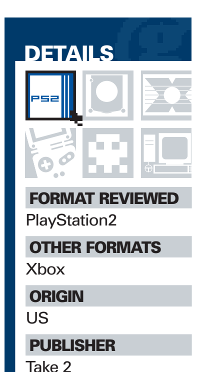
VERDICT 6/10
PERHAPS ONE PARTY TOO FAR




eMag

THE PLATOON'S BIKE WAS ALWAYS POPULAR WITH THE TROOPS

ROBOTECH: INVASION



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

OTHER FORMATS
Xbox

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
Take 2

DEVELOPER
Vicious Cycle

PRICE
£19.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-8

***Macross, Super Cross* and *Mospeada* are the three birthplaces for *Robotech*.** If you're into the series then you know this much already, and you'll probably be expecting lots of acrobatic robot action that's heavy on the war and deft on the style. What you get is a limp looking first-person shooter that features the unique selling point of enabling the player to transform into a Cyclone Attack Bike… as long as you're not in a tunnel, or climbing a ladder.

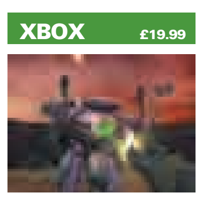
Transformers showed us that changing forms mid battle can be an exhilarating experience; *Robotech: Invasion* would like to differ. Morphing into a bike designed for the single purpose of kicking ass and eating dirt should give you a greater sense of power over the battlefield – it's the reason you carry a bike on your shoulders. So it's puzzling that although the FPS controls allow for accuracy and handle very similarly to *Halo*, switching to two-wheel mode is more like moving a grand piano upstairs than unleashing bi-cyclic hell.

The source animated series depicts such violence as a nimble affair with overly stylised missiles crunching through metal; the game decides to take away any sense of expression, style or acrobatics and makes you feel like a lump. Your missiles are more apologies than warheads and thus any desire to use Cyclone mode is lost. Not good news when that's meant to be the game's raison d'être. So it's two-legged combat not bad, and two-wheeled engagements rather embarrassing as we look over the scale of the available environments that go even further to persuade you that you should keep the wheels on your shoulders in classic first-person mode, which is simple to the point of being quaint. Giant N64-esque robots invariably have obvious weak spots and die in a shower of uninspiring rubble while human opponents buy the farm in a light and feeble manner known to games years older. Their attack patterns lack co-ordination and their fear factor is minimal.

All this negativity would make you think that we're taking a stroll down Duffgame Street, but that's not the case. *Invasion*'s innocent looks and gameplay do have some cohesion and its very simplicity is its one saving grace. It's bubblegum for your mind and never offensive. If it had appeared five years ago at the same price it would come recommended for the younger player. Too bad that this is now.

VERDICT 4/10
BETTER FPS THAN BIKE-BASED SHOOTER, BUT NOT MUCH

XBOX £19.99



The power of Xbox is used to convince the player that they are playing a lost N64 title that has been spring cleaned and popped onto the shelves for 20 quid. *Robotech*'s limp visual style gets magnified and you wonder why your console is so huge.

GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT



BETTER THAN

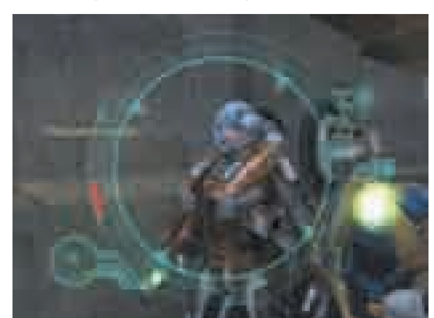
WORSE THAN



TRANSFORMERS



Your Cyclone Bike has rockets as powerful as you'd find on any Bonfire Night. But a little less exciting.



Character animation is minimal to the point of being purposely lax.

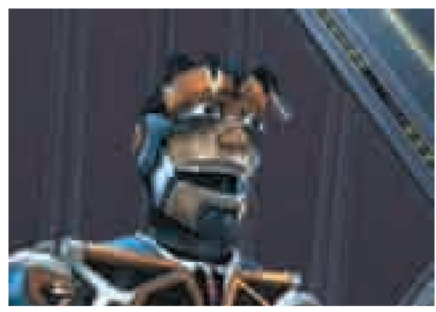


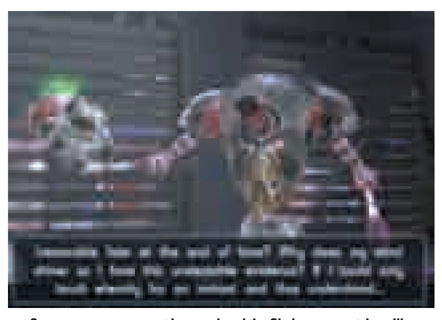
See a red eye, shoot a red eye – such is the law of the basic shoot-'em-up.

games™ GLOBAL
TAKING GAMING ONLINE
NETWORK PLAY: Eight players online on both versions allows you to shoot Americans.
ONE-SCREEN WONDER: There's a two-player split-screen mode for those without broadband.


eMag


The world of Scrapland has been beautifully realised.


This is you as D-Tritus. Check out that, ahem, steely gaze.


Come on, *someone* must have ordered the Shakespeare-style soliloquy.

SCRAPLAND

MERCURY STEAM SHOWS US WHAT IT'S MADE OF

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox

OTHER FORMATS
PC

ORIGIN
Spain

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

DEVELOPER
Mercury Steam

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
28 January '05

PLAYERS
1-2

We always get a good feeling about a game when the name American McGee is stamped on it. Whether it's the ingenious level layouts in games like *Doom II* or the *Quake* series, or the dark feel of *Alice*, his name generally means quality in at least one area of the title he's worked on. His latest project, *Scrapland*, takes the form of a third-person adventure in which you control a robot journalist faced with a new and daunting world where everything's made of scrap metal and humans aren't welcome – you really wouldn't expect anything less inventive from Mr McGee.

Taking a similar form to the *Jak* titles and Ubisoft's *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Scrapland* is set in a large sprawling environment where you can travel to any point you like. Unlike those titles, though, the freedom in *Scrapland* is more of a choice rather than an opportunity to get hideously lost, or the chance to embark on a seemingly important quest only to find that its sole purpose is to reward you with some basic item that you've already collected 20 times.

Nope, *Scrapland* is very clear about what it wants you to do and how it wants you to achieve it. With the completion of every task or Crazy Bet (missions that the local gambling kingpin sends you on for his own twisted amusement and gain) comes a new objective and map marker to show you exactly where it can be found – it's almost as if Mercury Steam wanted to make the

games™ FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HACK JOB: The ability to change into any one of 15 characters makes for plenty of variety.

ROCKET MAN: The customisable ships ensure you can fly with maximum comfort.



Upgrading your ship is an ongoing task, but it never really becomes a chore.



FAQs

Q. SO HOW DARK IS IT?
Considering the involvement of American McGee, not very. It's certainly no *Alice*.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT GOING TO LAST?
It all depends on what kind of player you are. There's plenty to do if you can be bothered to look around.

Q. WHAT ABOUT MULTIPLAYER?
Build ships out of the parts you have and take on your friends in a dogfight. Not bad, but nothing special.

COME FLY WITH ME

In order to get around Scrapland you're going to need a ship. Fortunately, as soon as you start the game you'll meet people with the contacts you need to get your hands on one. Not just any old ship, though – how would you like a fully customised vehicle that'll suit your racing and combat styles exactly? *Scrapland* offers you this opportunity and you have the ability to create your very own ship from a wealth of different components. Admittedly, when you start the game you'll have an extremely small selection of ship bits available but as you progress and unlock or find more you'll be able to create a dream machine that you can smother with your favourite weaponry – and that'll be important, as getting from A to B will be the least of your worries most of the time.



Take control of a battle-bot to really kick some brass (oh dear).

game as simple to play as it could by leaving a trail of big, flashing, yellow breadcrumbs for you to follow. Whether this is a good thing really depends on what sort of games player you are, and we're sure that there will be some out there who feel that having their hand held tightly and being led through the game is unnecessary. Actually, if the game wasn't the size it was then we may have agreed and considered it a flaw, but with the playing area being so large and with so many places becoming accessible as you progress, there were definitely more than a few occasions where we were glad for this shove in the right direction.

Of course, as with most games of this type there are plenty of smaller tasks to be found should you thoroughly explore the scrap metal planet you're placed upon, and these will provide you with information, bonus items and ship parts that can potentially make your life easier in return for your effort. In fact, there's the best part of 140 missions to be completed, which means *Scrapland* is fully capable of relieving you of a huge amount of time if you allow it to. And that won't be time wasted as this is good, solid fun.

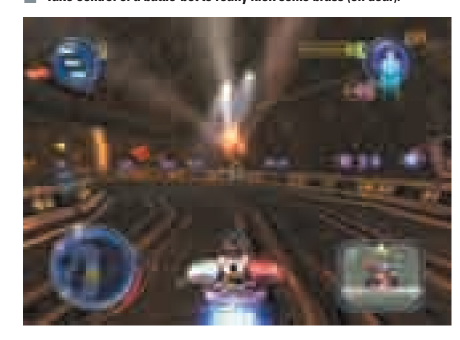


The most interesting element of the game – and the feature that sets the scene for many of the game's challenges – is your character's ability to hack into the planet's mainframe and change his appearance and skills to match any robot that's being stored there at the time. This service is helpfully provided by some power-mad religious cult-bots who collect info on every robot populating Scrapland so they can bring them back to life in exchange for cold, hard cash. Each of the 15 possible choices of bot has its own specific abilities and to complete tasks you'll have to switch between them while avoiding the authorities that disapprove of this illegal persona-stealing act. It's an element that works well as the base of gameplay and – in case you only choose to follow the path of basic missions – is the factor that gives the game much of its depth and saves the title from mediocrity. Scattered around these body-snatching tasks are all the other types of mission that you'd expect to find in a game of this ilk; dogfights and stealth sections all turn up regularly and are presented and implemented well in the story, and the races through Scrapland's vehicle-filled skies are impressive.

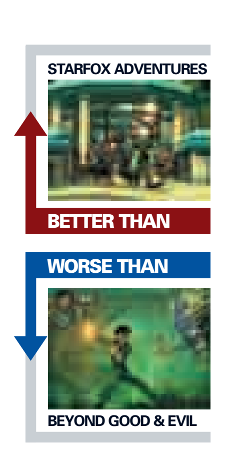
Scrapland is a good-looking game that offers inoffensive, simple gameplay that's likely to suit the tastes of most gamers. Due to knowing exactly what you're meant to be doing at all times, it loses the complete immersion that games like *Beyond Good & Evil* and a few others in the genre have managed to accomplish, but that doesn't make it any less enjoyable.



VERDICT 7/10
IT'LL TEST YOUR, ER, METAL









If there was one game that was crying out to be made it was *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic*. Combining the ultimate licence with a genre that was more than happy to accommodate it, and providing the depth of detail that hardcore fans of the sci-fi series craved like a drug, it was always going to be a success. BioWare poured its expertise into the title, and RPG-starved Xbox owners gobbled it up and never looked back. Eighteen months on, players still enthuse about *Knights Of The Old Republic* as if it had been released yesterday; as if *Fable*, *Sudeki* and all the other Xbox RPGs had never been made. Now Obsidian is faced with not only producing a sequel, but also building on the performance of what is considered to be one of the finest western RPGs ever created. The pressure is on…

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

A CASE OF OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW…



DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox (US)

OTHER FORMATS
PC

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
Activision

DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

PRICE
$49.99

RELEASE
11 February '05 (US: Out now)

PLAYERS
1

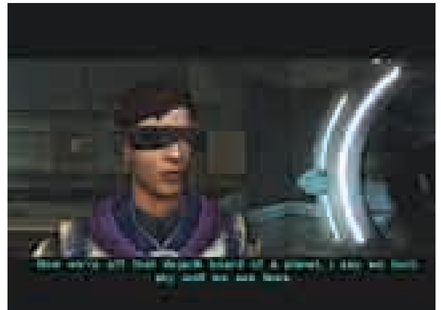
KOTOR II, however, manages to succeed on almost every level. To paraphrase the great movie itself: "Some would call it luck, but in our experience, there's no such thing as luck". Obsidian has stood and delivered like some rich fop at the business end of Dick Turpin's pistol. *Knights Of The Old Republic II* manages to be everything the original was, and in some cases more, all the while maintaining the classic feel of the first game that so many fell in love with back in 2003. Straight from the off, players will recognise that this is *KOTOR*, admittedly bearing shinier cut-scenes and more than a couple of visual improvements, but *KOTOR* nonetheless. The prologue can be skipped to save experienced players a good half hour of learning the game's controls all over again, and then they're thrown into a confusing galaxy of deceit, betrayal and old-fashioned *Star Wars* values.

Having said that, the first level of the game, which takes place on a mining facility named Peragus, is immensely slow paced and often dull. Although the whole point of the story is that the facility has been wiped out by a force, or forces, unknown this has a real impact on potential first-

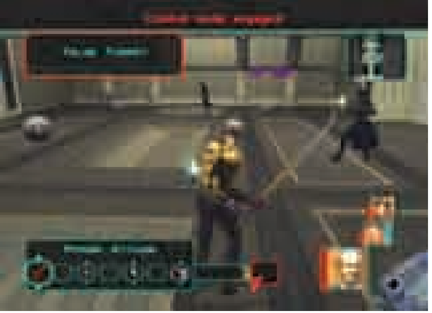


MAKE FRIENDS, INFLUENCE PEOPLE

One of the new features that has been implemented in *Knights of the Old Republic II* is the Influence system. This adds an extra dimension to the dialogue and character interaction as each decision the player takes will earn them respect from one party member and contempt from another. Choose your friends carefully and you'll be able to influence them to the extent that they'll start to behave like you, even treading towards the Dark or Light side of the Force in an effort to follow you on your journey. Interestingly, this means that if you gain the trust of a Dark-aligned character you can convert them to the Light side. Conversely, and undoubtedly more amusing, is the chance to drag good guys into the evil teachings of the Sith…



Sure, he's got that hip space speak mastered, but he ain't gettin' no respect 'til he takes off those pathetic shades.



War is confusing, but sometimes your characters tend to run around like headless chickens for no apparent reason. Perhaps they're just bored.



The Ithorian race only appears for a split second in the film trilogy, but these creatures play a large role in *KOTOR II*.

time players. None of the familiar *Star Wars* creatures or the bustling environments that made the first game such a joy to play appear until around four or five hours into the game, when players actually leave their starting world. Although this gives newcomers a chance to acquaint themselves with the controls and pick up on the series' incredibly detailed history, there is a sense that the whole affair drags on too long. It's only when the second world zooms into view that the action truly begins, so for anyone thinking about dipping into this particular series, we'd advise patience for the first couple of sessions.

Thankfully, once the shackles have been thrown off, there's plenty of opportunity for rediscovering that old magic from the even older Republic. Obsidian has prided itself on creating a game that has even more options than BioWare's original, and this becomes very evident once the warm-up is over. The decisions that the player will make throughout the game have connotations on so many levels, and each mission taken almost always steps beyond a simple offend one faction/befriend another scenario. Most missions have similar goals, but will vary according to how the budding Jedi undertakes his or her tasks, and all this is before we start to consider the choice between the Dark and Light sides.

Naturally, the Jedi-centric game has a strong emphasis on the path a warrior chooses to take, and once again the variety of choices allows players to really fine tune the type of Jedi they create. The game seems to make it rather easy for players to be evil, and perhaps this is a hidden connotation of the title *Sith Lords*, but being a Light-side Jedi requires plenty of concentration. This is part of what makes the *KOTOR* series so special, as simply rolling over and being sycophantically friendly will not always find favour with NPCs, nor will it guarantee those all-important Light-side points. Instead, the game stays faithful to the original ethic of *Star Wars* itself by showing that the Jedi are meant to be guardians of the peace in the fairest yet firmest possible manner.

Whichever path you decide to walk, there is no question of getting bored of the options here. The combat system is unchanged for this follow-

"THE GAME SEEMS TO MAKE IT RATHER EASY FOR PLAYERS TO BE EVIL, AND PERHAPS THIS IS A CONNOTATION OF THE TITLE 'THE SITH LORDS'"





LEVEL ONE BLUES

Anyone who played through the first *Knights Of The Old Republic* will be aware that they were instantly thrown into a world of possibilities and decisions. The action was immediate and exciting, and the levels never seemed to drag beyond their natural limits. Well, if the sequel has one failing it's that the first level seems to be too protracted and dull. The endless grey corridors and countless scraps with naff little droids on board the Peragus mining facility are a necessary evil, and they adequately demonstrate the new scope and depth that has been given to the series. However, the first stage might have benefited from being a little shorter, allowing players to access the elements that make *KOTOR II* great much more quickly.

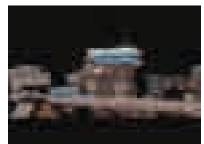
up; a wise choice on Obsidian's part, as modification does not always equal progress, especially when you're dealing with a fan base as passionate as RPG-loving *Star Wars* enthusiasts. Instead, the developer has quite rightly opted for the safer approach of piling on more 'stuff' to pad the game out a little and make the combat system work even harder for its money. As such, there are a large number of new Force powers to collect, as well as countless weapons, armour and general accessories. The original had hundreds of unique gizmos and gadgets, and it seems like the second has thrown in the same again for good measure. While some affect the gameplay in specific instances, most of the collectable content appears to have a minor impact on the game, as the old favourites still appear to be the most effective in combat and confrontational scenarios.

The new Force powers give the game more of a lift, and really bring out the feeling that the Jedi are the most important part of the adventure. Whereas this may seem like something that doesn't need pointing out, it gives the game a great deal of focus that could easily have been lost among the countless side quests and endless dialogue exchanges. 'Endless' seem to be one of



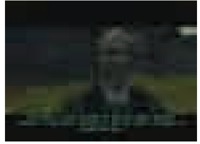
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINUTES



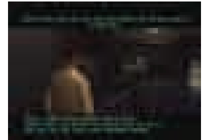
Start to meet up with new characters, and things are already getting a little strange. Why am I here, and what's with all the corpses scattered around?

3 HOURS



By now you should have got away from the slightly monotonous first level. Still, the back-story has been filled in and you're ready to take on the rest of the game.

10 DAYS



The game shows no sign of finishing, although your character should be well developed. Intimidating innocent beings with the point of a Lightsaber is still funny.

Bao-Dur can take down these force-fields with the simple swipe of a sword, so for now he's proving useful…





As with most RPGs, *Knights Of The Old Republic II* is all about collecting as much stuff as possible and saving it until the last boss.



An unarmed Wookiee is savage enough, but one that can dual-wield VibroBlades is serious trouble.



The scoundrel's ship of choice is back, and its ownership comes into question…

games™ FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MIXED COMBO: The combat system is a healthy blend of action and strategy, unrivalled on the Xbox.

AUTHENTIC: *KOTOR II* is pure *Star Wars*, from the score through to the accurate item names.

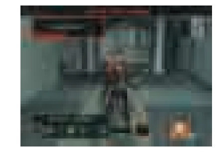
"'ENDLESS' SEEMS TO BE ONE OF THE BEST WORDS TO DESCRIBE KOTOR II, AS THE NUMBER OF MISSIONS – MAJOR AND MINOR – APPEARS TO HAVE INCREASED"

the best words to describe *Sith Lords*, as the number of missions – major and minor – appears to have increased. Xbox owners who were affronted by the brevity of *Fable* will be pleased to know that a decent finishing time for *KOTOR II* is around 48 hours. It's feasible that players will finish the game in far less, but rushing through is no way to savour the *Star Wars* experience. Missing out on some of the more humorous side quests and not taking advantage of the innovative Influence system would make this game seem average, even with the numerous plot twists. Ruining the surprise wouldn't be particularly fair so all we're prepared to say is that there are a number of returning characters, all of whom have their own specific agendas. In fact, almost every personality in this game has some something lurking in their closet, from skeletons to entire graveyards…

This sort of twisting storytelling is common in such popular franchises – because every part of the action is studied and analysed by the fans it becomes easy for the developer to deliver an earth-shattering storyline. *KOTOR II* has a genuinely engaging plot, but perhaps even that would fall down were it not for the haunting score. Composed by John Williams, the man responsible for all the *Star Wars* themes, the music of *The Sith Lords* is predictably sublime. It has the capacity to veil even the hammiest of plot devices or sections of voice acting to draw the gamer into a world that is utterly immersive. Although there are a fair number of familiar expressions, creatures and weapons, the game is held together by the sense that it is a near perfect reflection of the original film trilogy that started it all. There's no awkwardness or ham-fisted additions that seem out of place, even with the realisation that there's never even a sniff of one of the original movie characters. This can be attributed to the visual style, or the authentically branded content, but in many ways the lion's share of the credit belongs to the fantastic soundtrack and sound effects that fit the game like a glove.

It should be obvious by now that *Knights Of The Old Republic II* is the sequel it always should have been, and it's fair to say that the fans have once again been spoilt by such a magnificent offering. There's not even a hint of disappointment here, leading to one inevitable conclusion: you need this game because it carries the magic of *Star Wars* in every moment.

PC £29.99 OUT NOW



Almost exactly the same game, but this time released simultaneously on the PC. Last time around, home computer owners had to wait for this gem but were fobbed off with a few extra planets and creatures. None of that this time around.

FAQs

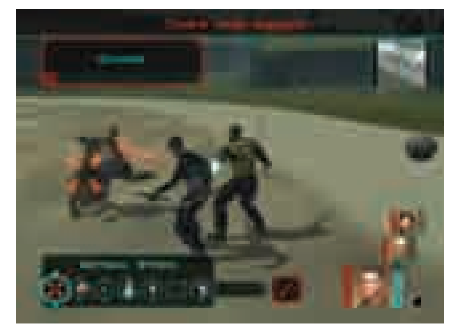
Q. IS THIS AS GOOD AS THE FIRST ONE?
Absolutely. The fact that the game has moved out of the BioWare offices hasn't affected the quality in the slightest.

Q. ARE THERE RETURNING CHARACTERS?
Yes, and fans of the original will certainly get a kick out of seeing old favourites.

Q. IF I DIDN'T PLAY THE FIRST GAME, WILL I LIKE THIS?
Of course you will – the first level fills in all the back-story you could wish for, and more…

VERDICT 9/10

AS ESSENTIAL AN RPG AS YOU'RE EVER LIKELY TO PLAY



These beasts are fairly simple fodder for a well-trained Jedi and a couple of extras from *The Matrix*.



The Force Scream ability is meant to be a fierce battle cry that stuns opponents, but it looks a little tame.



POCKET CHANGE

PUTTING THE FIRST WAVE OF PSP TITLES THROUGH THEIR PACES

You want an analogy comparing Sony's somewhat understated launch of the PSP to the arrival of Nintendo's DS? Try the tortoise and the hare – Nintendo has raced away in both Japan and the US by pushing out as many units as it can, while Sony is slowly but surely moving ahead with its shipments in Japan alone.

Though a lack of PSP hardware is obviously a sticking point for many, the same can't be said for the quality of the launch titles and it's here that Sony can be thought to have the distinct advantage; while Nintendo only had a couple of games available near launch that could be considered worthy purchases (*Super Mario 64 DS, Feel The Magic* and *Sawaru! Made In Wario*), nearly all of those ready for the PSP's release are highly enjoyable. The only problem is deciding which ones to buy – unless you've got money to burn or you're blackmailing your bank manager.

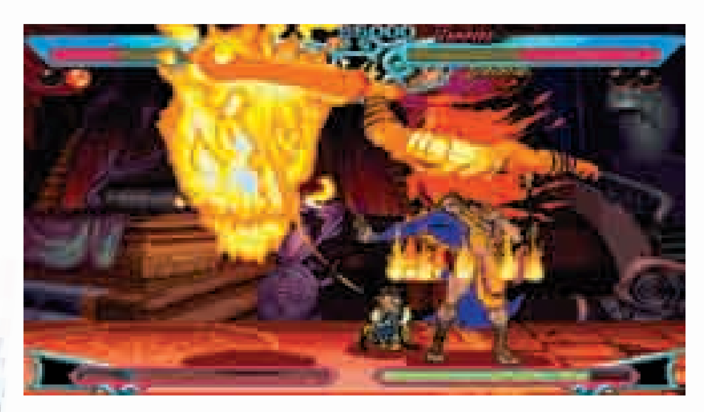
PRESENTATION How dare you all look so good



Ridge Racers

ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco
PRICE: ¥4,800
PLAYERS: 1 (1-6 via Wi-Fi)
RELEASE: March '05 (Japan: Out Now)

For the key launch title in the PSP's crown, Sony couldn't have asked for anything more from Namco when it comes to *Ridge Racers* – the game's presentation alone is guaranteed to be a selling point for less discerning gamers. That said, even those who like something more than just flashy graphics can't fail to be impressed by what this has to offer; not only is it visually impressive with its smooth frame rate, detailed tracks and stylish spot-effects, but the wide range of Euro-pop tunes and even the brash commentary will bring a smile to your lips. Ultimately, though, it's the fact that *Ridge Racers* is far closer visually to the PS2 version of the series than the PSone games that demonstrates the PSP's capabilities the most – a fact that could prove crucial come the handheld's western launch.



Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower

ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
PRICE: ¥4,800
PLAYERS: 1 (1-2 via Wi-Fi)
RELEASE: March '05 (Japan: Out Now)

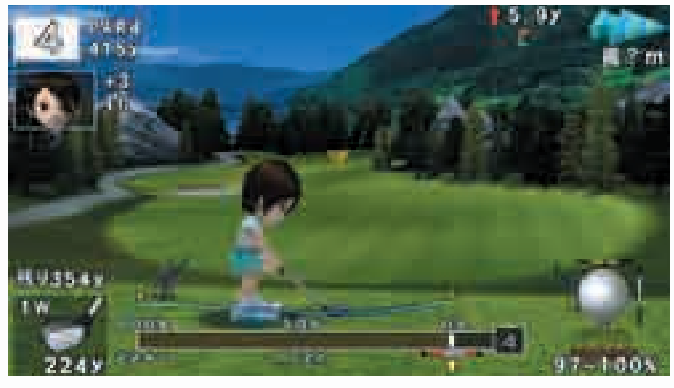
Yes, so it's a 2D beat-'em-up – hardly the most challenging kind of game to bring to a powerful handheld, you might think. Even so, Capcom has done a great job in adapting one of its more off-beat fighters for the PSP, creating a conversion that rivals even the graphical quality of the Dreamcast version that fans of the series hold in such high esteem. With its detailed backdrops and well-defined characters, *Vampire Chronicle* boasts slick animation in a near-perfect port, although the fact that the option to show the game in widescreen merely stretches the 4:3 image rather than showing a true 16:9 picture is a bit cheeky. Sadly, loading times can prove a sticking point, with significant delays between each fight – something that gets annoying when playing the single-round combat of Tower mode.



Lumines

ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai
PRICE: ¥3,800
PLAYERS: 1-2
RELEASE: March '05 (Japan: Out Now)

It shouldn't be much of a surprise to learn that the high point of *Lumines*' presentation lies not with its visuals (although the game looks great), but in its aural aspects. Offering a diverse selection of music that seems heavily influenced by *Rez*, the game's efforts to tie the on-screen action to the musical rhythm – dubbed Synaesthesia – are just as effective as the PS2 title, if not quite as advanced. Every action in the game has some kind of musical reaction, from moving or rotating blocks to scoring giant combos, meaning you never have the same experience twice. Combined with some sublime ambient tracks that even those not so into the electro-pop scene will enjoy, it makes for an attractive package that facilitates just the kind of pick-up-and-play gameplay you'd expect from a puzzle title.



Minna no Golf Portable

ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: SCEI
PRICE: ¥4,800
PLAYERS: 1 (1-8 via Wi-Fi)
RELEASE: March '05 (Japan: Out Now)

Yet more proof that the PSP's abilities are closer to the PS2 than the PSone, *Minna no Golf Portable* is almost a full-on clone of the series' earlier PS2 outings. Those familiar with the games will know this means an emphasis on light-hearted fun and distinctive anime styling rather than the realism you'd expect from a title like like *Tiger Woods*. Not surprisingly, this is perfectly suited to the PSP – the courses are nicely detailed; the animation on the players, many of whom return from previous games, is solid enough; and the music is twee without being annoying. Our only real concern lies with the loading times, which are the longest we've seen so far – static loading screens appear regularly, although the fact that the entire course loads before each round does go some way to alleviate this.

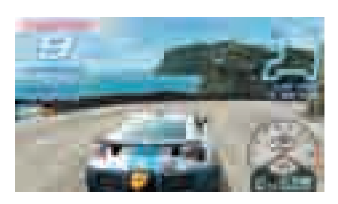
GAMEPLAY What's going on beneath the surface?



Ridge Racers

Is there really anyone still out there who doesn't know about *Ridge Racer*? We'd like to hope not – we hold the high-speed antics of the entire franchise very dear to our gaming hearts (well, *Ridge Racer V* aside perhaps). And that makes *Ridge Racers* the game that we've been waiting for – a celebration of everything *Ridge* with cars and tracks ripped straight from the annals of history: the original *Ridge Racer* and *RR Revolution* to *Rage Racer*, *RR4* and even the arcade-only *Rave Racer*. Certainly, it's not a completely new game by definition although the reworking of the older tracks through the updated visuals really makes all the difference.

The traditional *Ridge Racer* gameplay, as you might expect, remains unchanged – race as fast as you can around each of the 48 tracks on offer (12 courses, with reversed and mirrored versions included), sliding around the multitude of sharp bends and generally driving dangerously in an attempt to finish in first place. The only real fundamental change lies in the addition of a Nitrous gauge that fills up as you perform powerslides; it might seem like a novelty at first but at the higher levels where the opposition makes use of boosting as much as you do, every Nitrous becomes essential.



"THE ONLY REAL **FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE** LIES IN THE ADDITION OF A **NITROUS GAUGE** THAT FILLS AS YOU DO **POWERSLIDES**"

Although the obvious Single Race, Wireless Play and Time Attack modes are available, it's in the World Tour mode that you'll find the most action – a series of increasingly challenging races grouped together, the completion of which unlocks the wide range of cars available for use in the rest of the game.





Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower

The *Vampire* series of fighting titles (known as *DarkStalkers* outside Japan) might be more of an acquired taste than Capcom's earlier *Street Fighter* games, what with its heavier focus on button chain combo-related gameplay and unique timing, but there's no denying it's still great fun.

In a similar way to *Ridge Racers*, though, the PSP version of *Vampire Chronicles* is less of a completely new title and more a collection of almost all the previous games in the series – *Vampire: The Night Stalkers*, *Vampire Hunter*, *Vampire Saviour* and its Japanese-only sequel, *Vampire Saviour 2*. As such, all the characters from the four titles are present – from original favourites such as Demitri and Morrigan to later additions like Donovan, Jedah and Lilith – as well as three game styles that can be cycled through depending on whether you preferred the mechanics of *Vampire*, *Vampire Hunter* or *Vampire Saviour*.

Outside the faithful Arcade and Versus modes, though, the main addition for the PSP version is Tower mode – an ongoing battle similar to a standard Survival mode but with the added twist of having a team of three fighters that you can switch between instead of having to plough through with just one pugilist. Every fight you win moves you further up the 'tower' and unlocks various items (mostly artwork) in the Chronicle section, with different routes upwards dependant on differing pre-fight criteria such as winning with a special move or not using any punches.

"**THE PSP VERSION** OF VAMPIRE CHRONICLES IS **LESS A COMPLETELY NEW TITLE** AND MORE A COLLECTION OF THE **PREVIOUS GAMES IN THE SERIES**"

This is a fairly worthy addition to the franchise, especially as you can save your progress at any time, although to be fair we can't think of much else that Capcom could have done here.

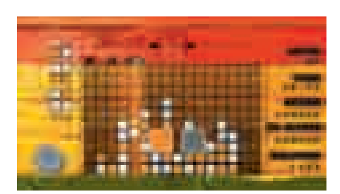




Lumines

As with most of the best puzzle games, *Lumines* revolves around an incredibly simple idea: match up the coloured blocks that fall from the top of the screen by rotating and placing them correctly, à la *Columns* or *Puyo Pop*. The big difference, however, is the 'laser' that sweeps the playing field at regular intervals – as it passes over blocks of colour that you've lined up they get wiped out and any blocks on top move down. Naturally, the trick is to get as many blocks of colour together in one fell swoop, racking up a massive combo and advancing your level in the process… although that's hardly as easy as it sounds.

Not surprisingly, you'd be right to assume that it's this aspect of *Lumines* that proves highly addictive. Just like most other puzzlers that require quick wit and even quicker reflexes, however, it takes time for you to reach that place where everything clicks; being able to combine multiple

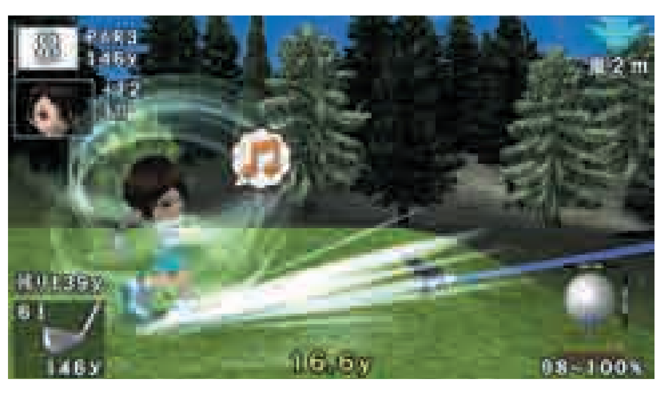


blocks, time your drops to get as much breathing room as possible ahead of the laser and make the best use of the all-powerful gem blocks (which can effectively clear an entire field if used correctly) takes a fair bit of practice.

There's also the demanding Puzzle mode that puts a slightly different spin on things, as using the coloured blocks to create a particular shape – everything from basic crosses and squares to animals, letters and even a smiley face – is far more taxing than you might think, if no less enjoyable. It might not seem as instantly accessible as something like *Tetris*, but *Lumines* is a fine puzzle game.

"AS WITH MOST OF THE **BEST PUZZLE GAMES**, LUMINES REVOLVES AROUND AN **INCREDIBLY SIMPLE IDEA**: MATCH THE COLOURED BLOCKS THAT **FALL FROM THE TOP OF THE SCREEN**"

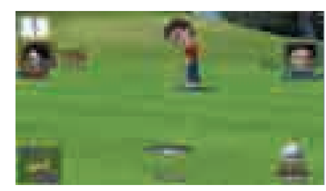




Minna no Golf Portable

You might have thought that going on the performance of past games in the series, *Minna no Golf Portable* (or *Everybody's Golf* or *Hot Shots Golf* depending on where you are in the world) might have stood out as one of the key launch titles – and indeed it does, at least in terms of how well it plays. However, if it's innovation you want then you're likely to be disappointed. Far from offering anything new, the PSP version of *Everybody's Golf* is virtually identical to previous PS2 outings in terms of mechanics and gameplay. That's certainly not a bad thing, as it virtually guarantees a high level of playability, but even so, it would have been nice to see the series take a step forwards rather than sideways.

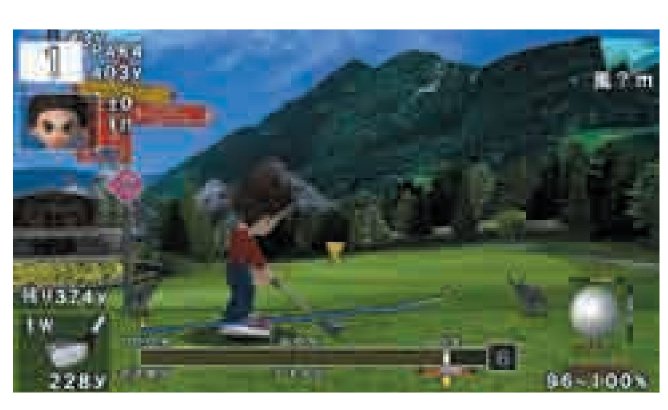
Nevertheless, what is on offer does do the *Minna no Golf* name proud. The emphasis, as always, is on



unlockable material with five courses, ten characters and a whole host of clothing and golfing accessories being available on top of the small selection on offer to begin with. Uncovering these extras requires extensive work in the game's Challenge mode, which presents you with a set number of holes over which to perform one of several tasks, usually beating a rival player or finishing under par.

The more you do, the more you unlock and the better your player gets – ability increases with every success, giving you more chance on the later courses. There's also an added Putting mode than can be used to earn points and unlock even more items when you fancy a break from the fairways.

"**FAR FROM OFFERING ANYTHING NEW,** THE PSP VERSION OF MINNA NO GOLF IS **VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL** TO THE PS2 OUTINGS"



CONTROL How is life after Dual Shock?



Ridge Racers

Surprisingly, *Ridge Racers* stands out as the only game here to make full use of the PSP's analogue stick – *Vampire Chronicle* and *Lumines* both use the D-pad, while *Minna no Golf* reduces the stick to the role of control for the fixed-point camera, rather than having an influence on your shots. However, this is also conclusive proof (if you ever needed it) that Sony's decision to include an analogue nub was well justified. The nub, which slides around on a single plane rather than being tilted like the Dual Shock sticks, gives you precise control over your car during even the most sideways of powerslides and is quickly mastered, despite appearing a little fiddly at first.

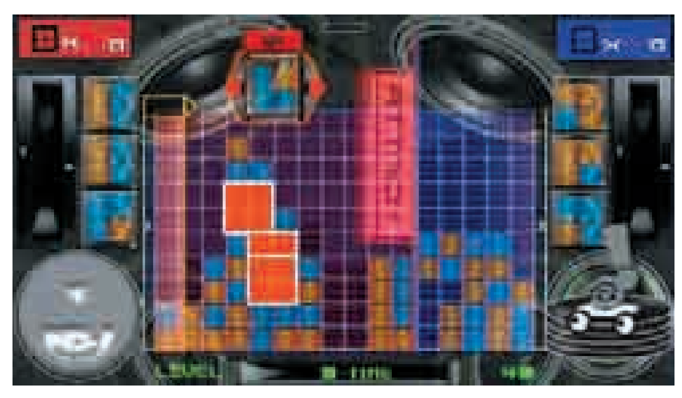
What's more, performing powerslides is ridiculously easy – a quick release of the accelerator followed by a sharp turn and then back on the gas can have you sliding into every corner (although the type of car you choose has an effect on the handling, of course).



Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower

While it's hard to fault much of what *Vampire Chronicle* has to offer, the same can't be said for the controls – although, to give the developer its dues, the brunt of the blame falls with the PSP itself rather than Capcom. The shoulder buttons are incredibly clicky and hard to use in the midst of frantic combat, which results in players effectively losing two of their six attack buttons. The fact you can change the configuration softens the blow marginally (we've taken to a more *Capcom Vs SNK* approach by dropping the Strong/Forward attacks altogether) but even so, it's a compromise that shouldn't have to be made.

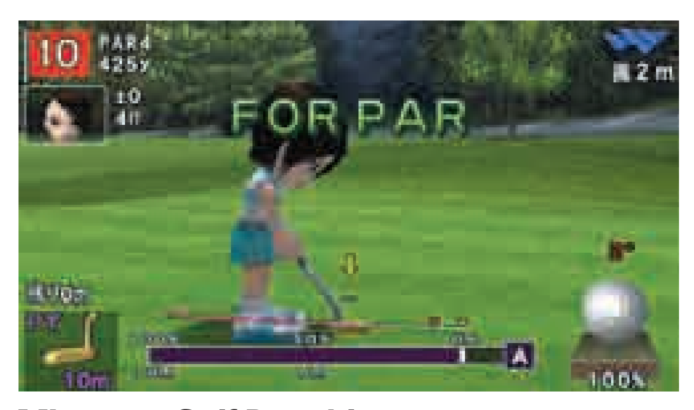
The buttons and D-pad can prove slightly sticky at times too, which can throw off your timing at the worst moments. The game's certainly no less playable for it (unless you're a hardcore player, of course) but it's hardly the start that Sony will have wanted.



Lumines

A simple puzzle game, even one that's not as straightforward as it first appears, requires simple controls, and thankfully *Lumines* delivers a system that takes only a few seconds to master. Strangely, the game shuns the PSP's analogue stick in favour of the conventional D-pad, although this does at least allow for more precise positioning of your blocks when things become tight. Having all four face buttons assigned to block rotation duties (two for clockwise, two for anti-clockwise) is certainly accommodating depending on how you like to place your thumb over the buttons, but this can prove the downfall of any careless player once space becomes a problem through a single wrong button press.

But then, that's the charm of the game – keeping your cool under pressure and mastering a deceptively simple concept as quickly as you can to keep those combos coming thick and fast; and the controls manage to convey that perfectly.



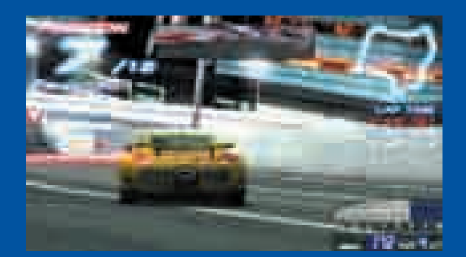
Minna no Golf Portable

Although the PS2 versions of *Minna no Golf* use the Dual Shock's analogue sticks, the PSP version thankfully steers well clear of this (possibly to prevent breakage of the somewhat fragile-feeling nub) and plumps for a traditional power meter that requires good timing and reflexes if you're to get the best out of it.

Placing all the action on the Circle button is obviously a good thing as it helps keep things nice and simple, while the placement of club selection on the shoulder buttons, basic camera controls on the remaining face buttons and shot movement on the D-pad is easy to get to grips with.

The only thing we're not convinced by is the fixed-point camera (which you control with the analogue nub) that appears to have no real use at all – being able to look around is all very nice, but it doesn't do anything apart from show off the scenery.

OVERALL Verdicts after the smoke clears

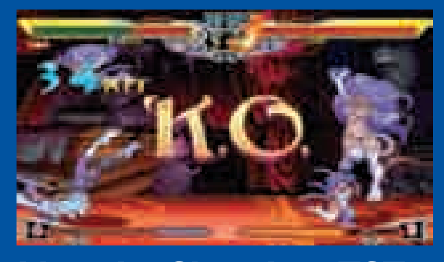


Ridge Racers

***Ridge Racers* emerges as the consummate package as far as PSP launch titles go – true, it cribs from every other game in the series instead of offering real originality, but that's a small price to pay for the amount of quality that's packed into the game.** Even more perfectly suited to the handheld market than we might have hoped, the game even caters for when you're only playing for limited periods by creating unique tours once you tell it how long you'll be playing. That there's so much to keep you going for ages – not to mention how polished it is – shows not just how capable the PSP is, but how serious Sony is about finding its feet in the handheld market. *Ridge Racers* is a clear warning shot across Nintendo's bow; a game that impresses on almost every level.



VERDICT 8/10
SO POLISHED YOU CAN SEE YOUR FACE IN IT



Vampire Chronicle: TCT

We're pleased Sony has taken a chance by having a 2D game in the launch line-up for a system that will undoubtedly be lauded for its 3D capabilities – hopefully, it's a sign that the Japanese giant is having second thoughts about the death of 2D. That said, *Vampire Chronicle* is the weakest title of those here if only because of key faults (control problems and loading times) that can't be blamed entirely on the game. Certainly in terms of graphics and sheer mechanics, this is a faultless conversion with some great animation and every technical element of the games intact. However, there's no escaping the flaws that hold the game back from being a necessary purchase, at least for now – only the hardcore fans will have to have it, and they're the ones most likely to end up disappointed.

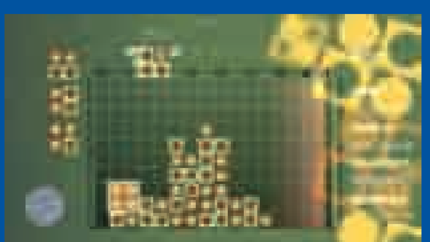
VERDICT 7/10
GREAT PORT MARRED BY HARDWARE FLAWS

Lumines

Out of all the launch games we've had for our PSPs, it's been a close call between *Lumines* and *Minna no Golf Portable* as to which has eaten up the most of our time. However, the sheer simplicity and hook of *Lumines* has been something that's been hard to escape, especially once you look up from the screen and realise that several hours have flown by. Most definitely, it's one of those puzzle games that defines the term 'in the zone'; once you've found that special place where the rest of the world stops and all you can see are flowing lines of falling blocks and massive combos, you can't fail to appreciate what the game is doing. Whether it's the best game of the launch line-up is a matter of taste, but there's certainly no question of its all-round quality.



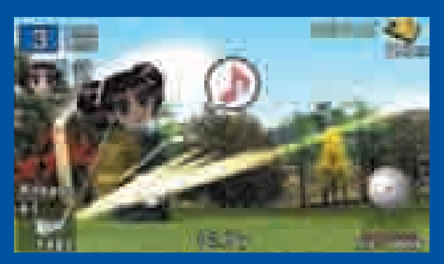
VERDICT 8/10
ADDICTIVE TO AN ALMOST PAINFUL DEGREE



Minna no Golf Portable

As has been the case with virtually every game in the series, it's hard not to like *Minna no Golf Portable*. All the positive things about the games have been condensed into a title that, combined with the PSP's standby mode that can suspend and recall any game even when the battery dies, proves incredibly suited to the handheld format. Again, it's a matter of having so much to do; even though there are only six courses, the range of challenges and unlockables (as well as the never-ending desire to constantly improve your player's stats) adds a level of playability to what you'd expect from a golf game. It demands skill without being overly realistic and is challenging without being frustrating – an ideal combination that forms the backbone of an incredibly enjoyable game.

VERDICT 8/10
HUGELY PLAYABLE WITH PLENTY OF REPLAY VALUE



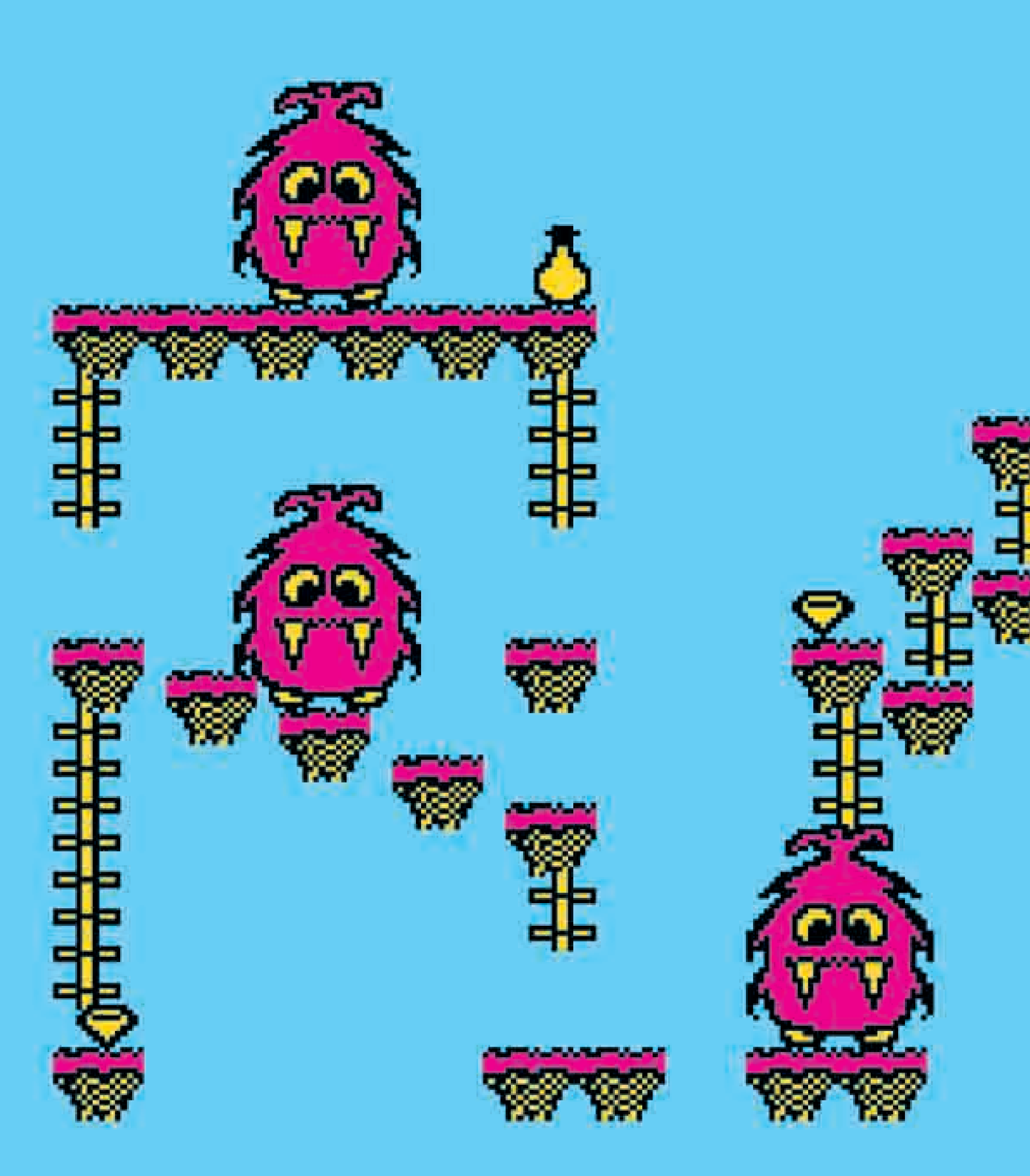
THE PSPERFECT LAUNCH?

A LACK OF HARDWARE, BUT NOT QUALITY

Undoubtedly, Sony has already landed the first blow against Nintendo with its rather low-key launch of the PSP – a high-quality line-up of launch titles that has given buyers enough choice to come away with at least a couple of decent games from the outset. Obviously, there are some titles here that we haven't covered simply because of their appeal, from *Armored Core Formula Front* (with its daunting language barrier) to incredibly niche games like *Mahjong Fight Club*, but even these help to expand the handheld's variety of titles and appeal, in Japan at least. Even leaving these titles aside, it's hard to suggest that a similar launch in both the US and Europe won't be hugely successful, despite Sony's current in-house launch line-up for the UK looking decidedly dull (we can't help but feel that there's too heavy an emphasis on racing and sports titles, especially since only *WipEout Pure* stands out beside *Ridge Racers* and *Everybody's Golf* as worthy of interest). Hopefully, it'll be Sony's reliance on third-party publishers such as Capcom and Konami that will save the day in the west, although there's no denying that Nintendo needs to get itself in order if it hopes to best the quality of the PSP's launch come March.



For times when only one F-word will do **Frak! – BBC B Micro [Aardvark Software] 1984**




eMag



A PARAGON PUBLICATION
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RETRO NEWS, GAMES THAT TIME FORGOT, BUYERS' GUIDE, RETRO CONTACT, ULTIMATE COLLECTION AND MUCH MORE...

RETRO NEWS

Find out what's going on in the here and now of retro gaming

Resolutions – everyone makes some, but few ever actually bother to keep them. It's only a few days into 2005 and I've already broken three of my promises (although if I hadn't stepped on that Lisa Simpson McDonald's toy my elaborate cursing would never have been expressed).

Fortunately, my devotion to retro gaming will remain as strong as ever, and as we go into the New Year you can expect plenty of interesting features and articles. This month we have an in-depth look at the *Metal Gear* series and we get to chat with revered retro artist Oliver Frey. There's also a four-page review of Sega's *Sonic Mega Collection Plus*, a long overdue Clash Of The Titans, an interview with Retrovision's Mark Rayson and a look back at one of the worse film licences ever made.

You may have noticed that the Classic Machine section has been on hiatus for a few months; don't worry, it's not been forgotten, but it will be returning in an all-new format. Indeed, the same can be said for most of the current elements in the section. There's no cause for concern, though, you won't be receiving a horrific new re-design or a drastic change in direction. Just think of it as a retro spring clean, but without the feather dusters and the fragrant smell of Mr Sheen.



Darran Jones, Retro Editor

Brits Rule

GALAXIAN HIGH SCORE FINALLY BEATEN AFTER TWO DECADES

The name Gary Whelan may not ring any bells, but in retro circles he's become a bit of a legend. His claim to fame? He's just obliterated the *Galaxian* high score that's been unbeaten on Twin Galaxies (the world's most respected videogame high-score database) for 20 years. We caught up with the 45-year-old engineer to find out how he achieved victory.



games™: When did you first play *Galaxian* and what effect did it have on you?
Gary Whelan: It was my local pub in 1979. *Galaxian* had replaced the *Space Invaders* that was already there, and at first everyone was disappointed – until we played it. I've always loved *Galaxian*; it was the first videogame that I really connected with, and I was pretty good at it too…

g™: How long had you been trying to beat the old record?
GW: I've been playing *Galaxian* for a very long time now. I've been going for the record for the last 12 months or so, practising daily for a good couple of hours.

g™: You achieved your high score with your own arcade cabinet. Do you ever play the MAME version?
GW: I've only played MAME sporadically. It's the closest alternative there is to the real thing, but I don't think that's the case with *Galaxian*. However, there are so many different Rom Sets for this game in MAME that it's quite possible I've just not played the same one as mine yet.

g™: What was the trickiest part of the game and were there any close calls while attempting your record?
GW: Trickiest part of the game? Probably the concentration required on the later levels. The clue to getting high scores on this game is technique and total concentration.

I had many close calls. *Galaxian* starts with three lives, with one extra awarded at 7,000 points, so all you've got is four lives – and I ended up on my last life at 250,000, still needing 150,000 to break the record.

g™: Any other scores you're keen on breaking?
GW: Probably *Galaga*, *Space Invaders* and *Moon Cresta*, although I've not yet finished with *Galaxian*. I'd like to achieve a score of over a million on *Galaxian*, something I'm planning this year.

■ You can see video clips of Gary's record-breaking achievement at www.wayoftherodent.com/guests/bob_garywchamp.htm

DS GOES RETRO CRAZY

FIRST CLASSICS FOR NEW MACHINE

Nintendo's DS has only been on sale for a few months, but publishers are already realising that its innovative control scheme could be the perfect way to revisit old games.

Retro Atari Classics should be available for the handheld in March and will feature well-loved classics like *Pong*, *Missile Command* and *Breakout*. Although you'll be able to play the games in all their 8-bit glory, developer Taniko will be creating new 'tagged' alternatives that will use the DS's unique abilities. Another interesting aspect of these new tag modes is that they'll feature new visuals courtesy of famous graffiti artists like Reas, Obey Giant and Delta.

We're not too sure about the new visual direction, but we're looking forward to playing games like *Breakout* with the DS's stylus, although we'll be buggered if we know how *Tempest* will work…

GAMING NEWS

MORE RETRO HITS ON THE WAY

PLAYSTATION2 SEGA AGES RANGE MAKES ITS WAY OVERSEAS

Not content with releasing *Sonic Mega Collection Plus*, Sega has revealed it has another classic compilation up its sleeve. Due out in the US in March for the PS2, the *Sega Classics Collection* features ten of Sega's best-loved titles including *Space Harrier*, *OutRun*, *Golden Axe*, *Virtua Racer* and *Alien Syndrome*.

First released in Japan, the original range was called *Sega Ages 2500* and now features over 17 classic games. Each disc contained the original game and an enhanced remix that used the full capabilities of the PS2. It's unclear if the original games will be included in the new compilation and when it will be released (if at all) in the UK. While the Japanese games have proved popular, some remakes appear to be better then others. We'll bring you more information in a later issue.



GETTING DIZZY

TREASURE ISLAND DIZZY RE-RELEASED

Fans of the Oliver Twins' plucky ovoid will be pleased to hear that Codemasters has made his second outing available for download.

Released in 1988, *Treasure Island Dizzy* saw our hero stranded on a deserted island and trying to get home. Featuring more detailed visuals and an enhanced playing area *Treasure Island Dizzy* was a worthy instalment in the Dizzy series.

Codemasters is notoriously protective of its old IP and the Oliver Twins' sequel is only the second game to have been released to the general public (the first being *BMX Simulator*). Let's hope we see more classics appear or, better yet, a compilation.

Download *Treasure Island Dizzy* from: www.codemasters.co.uk/downloads/index.php?downloadid=17409



Retro DIARY

As old-school gaming gets more popular, it's about time everyone knew about upcoming retro events...

FEBRUARY '05

Phantasy Star Trilogy

Date: 1 Feb **Publisher:** Sega **Price:** £14

Sega's classic remakes continue, although we're not too sure why it decided to leave out *Phantasy Star III*. New visuals, soundtracks and features should ensure that this compilation feels like a breath of fresh air.

Sonic Mega Collection Plus

Date: 4 Feb **Publisher:** Sega **Price:** TBC

Already available on the GameCube, *Sonic Mega Collection Plus* will give Xbox and PlayStation2 owners even more hedgehog-based titles, making this a promising collection.

Retrovision

Date: 11-14 Feb **Location:** The George Hotel, Frome, Somerset, BA11 1AF
Price: £10-£25

This year's Retrovision is looking like being yet another four days of great retro gaming. Competitions will be held on the likes of the Dreamcast, C64 and Vic 20. There'll be plenty of traders and stalls and you can guarantee that there'll be piles of classic games to play. You may even see Jeff Minter…

MARCH '05

Sega Classics Collection

Date: TBA **Publisher:** Sega **Price:** TBC

Sega's latest compilation features remakes of many of its classic arcade games and is available for PS2. *Golden Axe*, *OutRun*, *Space Harrier*, *Bonanza Bros* and *Columns* are just a few of the games on offer, so start saving.

Retro Atari Classics

Date: TBA **Publisher:** Atari **Price:** TBC

The DS's first retro compilation is looking mighty interesting. Play original classics like *Asteroids*, *Tempest* and *Pong*, or play newly enhanced versions that use the DS's innovative abilities. Definitely one to watch.

JULY '05

GCE UK

Date: 30-31 July **Location:** Fairfield Halls, Croydon **Price:** TBC

After the success of last year's event, we've been told that another GCE is now a certainty. Look out for guest appearances from Matthew Smith, Archer Maclean, Jeff Minter and hopefully many more.

AUGUST '05

Classic Gaming Expo (CGE)

Date: TBA **Location:** TBA **Price:** TBA

Last year's event was attended by none other than Konami and Midway and proved to be a huge success. As the expo prepares to enter its eighth year, you can be sure that 2005's event will be even better.

SEPTEMBER '05

Jagfest '05

Date: TBC **Location:** TBC **Price:** TBC

Details are still sketchy at the moment, but Jagfest UK should be returning this year. The event has been running for several years and has slowly been gathering momentum. If you're a fan of Atari's ill-fated console, check it out.

If you know of, or are hosting, any retro events, please contact the Retro Editor at darranj@paragon.co.uk

CLASH OF THE TITANS

R•T•Y•P•E

As gaming infiltrated the home market a new breed of gamer evolved. Dubbed the 'fanboy', he associated himself with a certain genre, machine or even developer or publisher, and then ridiculed all that opposed him. First recorded in playgrounds in the early Eighties, typical arguments revolved around who had the better machine, or which game looked best on which format. We aim to put a stop to years of squabbling by finding the definitive versions of some classic titles. This month we look at the 8-bit computer versions of one of the greatest shooters ever made – *R-Type*.

ROUND 1: VISUALS

COMMODORE 64: Manfred Trenz and Andreas Escher did a sterling job with this conversion. Despite the visuals being a little on the chunky side they are very accurate renditions of the original arcade sprites and are complemented by some wonderfully smooth scrolling.

SPECTRUM: Mind-blowing is the only way to describe the incredible conversion of *R-Type* on the humble Spectrum. Masses of colour, instantly recognisable sprites and impressive scrolling all combine to deliver one of the most aesthetically pleasing games we've ever seen on the system. If your Spectrum was laughed at by Amstrad and C64 owners this was guaranteed to shut 'em up.

AMSTRAD: This is by far the worst looking version of the lot. It's obviously a rushed port of the Spectrum game, and while it doesn't lack vibrancy it looks very basic; hell, even the scrolling is worse than the Spectrum conversion. This is a real disappointment.

WINNER: SPECTRUM
RUNNER UP: C64

ROUND 2: AUDIO

COMMODORE 64: Although it's slightly off-key in certain places, the C64's rendition of the *R-Type* music is surprisingly good. It takes a while to warm to, but once you're used to the differences you'll be humming along. Spot effects are suitably meaty and make this the best of the lot.

SPECTRUM: While it doesn't boast the C64's music, it does try to mimic the arcade's opening intro, which is more than the Amstrad bothered to do. Unsurprisingly, the Spectrum version is limited to rather cute bleeps that don't really sit well with blowing up hordes of Bydo scum. That said, they're still better than the Amstrad's effects.

AMSTRAD: We weren't expecting this to be up there with the C64, but some sort of music would have been nice. Sadly, all we get is some lame sound effects that sound like digital farts. The Amstrad could do so much better than this.

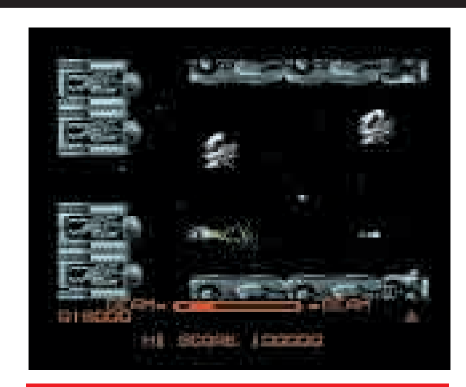
WINNER: C64
RUNNER UP: SPECTRUM

ROUND 3: GAMEPLAY

COMMODORE 64: The smooth scrolling makes it very easy to avoid the many bullets you constantly face and you can easily use your arcade tactics. The controls are pretty responsive but we did find it easier to use a joystick. Overall though, a good solid effort.

SPECTRUM: Sure, the colour clash can make the later levels tough, but the responsive controls make up for that. Easily playable whether you're using a joystick or keys, *R-Type* on the Spectrum is as playable now as it ever was. A sterling conversion that perfectly captures the original.

AMSTRAD: Although the visuals and sound are pretty poor, the superb gameplay is still as good as ever. It's not as responsive to play on keys as the Spectrum, but this is still a great example of how poor visuals and sound can't harm a great game.



WINNER: SPECTRUM
RUNNER UP: C64

AND THE WINNER IS…

SPECTRUM

So what if people complained that the Spectrum was underpowered? It could still deliver amazing games and with the case of *R-Type*, it totally outstripped its superior peers. Make no mistake: this is probably one of the greatest coin-op conversions for the machine ever made, and it even gives the 16-bit versions a run for their money. A worthy winner.







R-TYPE II (Arcade) Irem, 1989 – Japanese Arcade Flyer



Dungeons & Dragons

SHADOW OVER MYSTARA

A SCROLLING DUNGEONS & DRAGONS FIGHTER? THAT'LL NEVER WORK…

Release: 1996
Format: Arcade, Saturn
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-House

For all its inherent geekiness – "I'll smite you with my +4 Sword of Dancing" – the Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game has received numerous videogame ports over the past 20 years. While many have (unsurprisingly) taken the RPG route, Capcom decided to marry the popular pen-and-paper game to its CPSII board and delivered what we feel to be one of its greatest scrolling fighters ever made. Although Capcom first tried this strange hybrid in 1993 with *Dungeons & Dragons: Tower Of Doom*, the far superior sequel has earned our attention.

The developer had also already tested the waters with its fantasy scrolling fighters *King Of Dragons* and *Knights Of The Round*, so by the time *Tower Of Doom* was released Capcom had a well-known licence to complement its successful formula. *Shadow Over Mystara* successfully combined all the components that made those other fighters so enjoyable in one fantastic title.

The biggest change to the franchise was the addition of two new powerful characters: a female Thief who had fantastic agility and was able to sneak up on opponents and deliver a devastating sneak attack, and a male Mage who came complete with an awesome range of spells that could quite literally level the playing field. The Cleric, Dwarf, Elf and Fighter also made a re-appearance, but now featured new special moves and animations that made them superior to their *Tower Of Doom* counterparts.

While it first seemed to be just another scrolling fighter, *Shadow Over Mystara* had a surprising amount of depth that wasn't apparent after a few short plays. Tapping jump and fire, for example, allowed your chosen character to pull off a *Final Fight*-style move that would cause great damage but deplete energy, while more complex moves could be activated by pulling off familiar *Street Fighter II* button combos. And then there was the inventory system. Although it appeared unwieldy at first, you were soon able to cycle through your items with ease and could manage many more items and spells than were available in the previous game.

Gameplay was also a lot deeper then first impressions suggested



▲ "That's torn it," thought the mythical creature as the dragon swooped down and swallowed him whole…

RETRO *Games That Time Forgot*

▼ Quick! Get your mace out – or is it a staff? Perhaps a… oh, you're dead.



GREAT AND STILL GREAT

A scrolling fighter might seem like a strange vehicle for the Dungeons & Dragons licence but it was actually a very wise choice. The original tabletop game relied on teamwork, which is no different to the many videogames that have appeared. Atari's *Gauntlet* had already proved that there was plenty of interest in fantasy fighters and it couldn't have been a hard decision for Capcom to take the game above ground, change the perspective and throw in a proper licence. The fact that titles like *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* are still being made (and, more importantly, still doing well) suggests that we'll be seeing D&D titles for some time to come.



▲ Twenty-sided dice were, sadly, not needed, but that didn't mean you couldn't take them to the arcade with you.

and it surprised those who thought this was another typical button basher. Players who simply mashed the buttons would soon find their characters repeatedly dying (especially as *Mystara* featured a much shorter attack chain than its predecessor). As with *Tower Of Doom* careful use of the block button – which many players didn't even know about – was essential for making progress and became invaluable when going up against the game's many bosses.

The multiple routes and hidden rooms that had proved so popular in the first game returned, and though they were still just as short they did help to prolong the game's replay factor (especially if you intended to retrieve the three hidden swords that had been fiendishly tucked away).

For many, though, *Shadow Over Mystara* was all about the fighting and in this respect it didn't disappoint. While enemies like Goblins, Owlbears and Gnolls were easily recognisable and made up the bulk of your opponents, it was the fantastic bosses that provided the most memorable encounters. Despite their enormous size (the red dragon stood several screens high) all were superbly animated, looked outstanding and were incredibly tough to defeat; thank god the four-player option had been retained – strength in numbers, and all that.

Sadly, *Shadow Over Mystara* only made it to the Saturn (along with *Tower Of Doom*) as part of the *Dungeons & Dragons Collection*, and though it was a reasonably faithful port it suffered from some loading problems. Unless you're lucky enough to own the original arcade board, the only way you can play it now is in your memories…

Worst LICENCE EVER

Although films, books and TV have produced some great game tie-ins, they haven't always worked. Join us as we take a look at another licence that never should have seen the light of day…

BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA

Year: 1986
Format: Various home systems
Publisher: Electric Dreams Software
Developer: Software Studios

John Carpenter's quirky film *Big Trouble In Little China* may have secured a cult following over the years, but the same can't be said for the horrendous videogame version. With all the fisticuffs that take place in the film, a scrolling fighter must have seemed like the perfect way to bring the film to the gaming masses, but somewhere along the line something went very wrong…

Rather then delivering a fast-paced, tense brawler, Software Studios produced a plodding mess that had little in common with its subject matter. While it was possible to switch between three different characters – Jack Burton, Wang Chi and Egg Shun – they all played very similarly, so there wasn't much point changing who you controlled.

Visually, the game was – how can we say it? – a bit of an eyesore and each home version did little (if anything at all) to push its host machine. The Commodore 64 and Amstrad versions were particularly dire and sported horrendous animation, unimaginative sprites and some very nondescript locations. Dull as ditchwater level design complemented the unimpressive visuals, and the whole sorry mess fell apart once you infiltrated the infamous sewers.

Extremely monotonous to crawl through, the sewers were difficult to negotiate and were filled with stupidly tough monsters that were ridiculously hard to avoid. It may have been 'all in the reflexes' for Jack Burton, but you needed to be half-man, half-cat to avoid the horrors of this offensive release.







EAGER TO REPEAT THE SUCCESS IT HAD WITH THE SONIC MEGA COLLECTION FOR NINTENDO'S GAMECUBE, SEGA IS NOW RELEASING AN ENHANCED VERSION FOR XBOX AND PS2 OWNERS. JOIN US AS WE TRY TO UNEARTH WHAT SONIC'S 'PLUS' ACTUALLY STANDS FOR...

Format: **PlayStation2, Xbox**
Price: **£29.99**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **Sonic Team / Traveller's Tales**

If you're a regular Retro reader you'll know that we've been waiting for the release of *Sonic Mega Collection Plus* for quite some time. With the original – and very enjoyable – *Mega Collection Plus* on the GameCube now available as a budget title, it's pleasing to see that Sega has added plenty of extras to ensure that PlayStation2 and Xbox owners don't feel short changed with this edition of the blue hedgehog's compilation.

As well as including all the titles from the GameCube collection, Sega has thrown in several Game Gear titles from *Sonic Adventure DX: Director's Cut* including *Sonic Drift*, *Sonic Labyrinth* and *Sonic Blast*. In all there are 20 games here; that works out at £1.50 per game, which is pretty good value for money.

Despite his advanced age Sonic is still proving incredibly popular. *Sonic Heroes* was a huge commercial success (even if it wasn't a critical one) and has now sold over 2 million copies; but then, what would you expect from a character who was once more famous than Mickey Mouse?

Over the next four pages, we'll be looking at a selection of the games in Sega's new collection and finding out if Sonic can still cut it. While most games are based around the exploits of everyone's favourite hedgehog, there's also a smattering of other titles (such as *Ristar* and *Comix Zone*) from various Sonic developers; so if you're looking for variety *Sonic Mega Collection Plus* definitely delivers.







SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

It might be looking a little long in the tooth nowadays and it can't hope to compare to the superior sequel, but there's little doubt that *Sonic The Hedgehog* is still a great little game – and an important one at that. Wonderfully slick presentation, some hummable tunes (especially in the Green Hill Zone), and that familiar and easy to learn gameplay are just as striking now as they were 14 years ago. The exhilaration you got from racing through the distinctive levels is still here and even the bonus level seems better than we remember it (although it's still incredibly frustrating later on in the game).

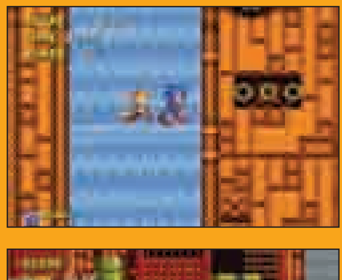
This franchise starter may have been eclipsed by its superior sequels, but it remains a key part of videogame history thanks to its ground-breaking speed and fluid movement (not to mention the fact that Sonic gave Mario a run for his money – quite literally). This is a crucial addition to this compilation, and still great fun.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

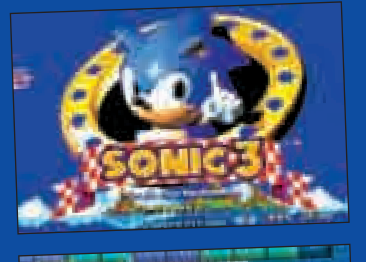
After the colossal success of *Sonic The Hedgehog*, a sequel was inevitable. Fortunately for Sonic fans it was superior to the original in every way and even introduced a brand new character, Miles 'Tails' Prower, a cheeky young two-tailed fox.

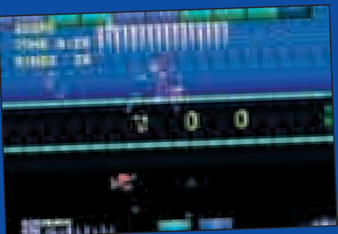
Featuring enhanced visuals, improved level design and more toe-tapping tunes, as well as a great new bonus level that was actually fun to play, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* proved that Sonic Team was a developer to watch and confirmed without a shadow of a doubt that Yuji Naka's creation was no flash in the pan.

For many, the greatest aspect of *Sonic 2* was the inclusion of the two-player mode. Alright, so the visuals still look as squashed now as they ever did, but even today, racing against a mate is strangely compelling thanks to the fantastic controls and the simple, straightforward gameplay.









SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

Sonic's third outing is something of a mixed bag and even today has gamers split over its merits. While there's little doubt that *Sonic 3* looked the business, many people were less than impressed with the changes Sonic Team had made to the core game.

Playing through *Sonic 3* now reveals that Sega was obviously trying to beat Nintendo at its own game. While it was still possible to speed through the levels – and boy, was Sonic getting quicker with age – the ability to save your game and the huge amount of items to interact with meant that the basic gameplay was starting to differ greatly from Sonic Team's first game.

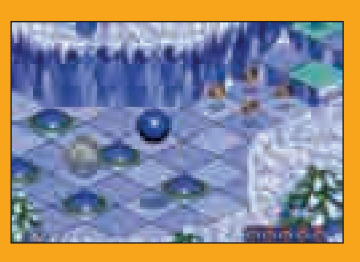
To be honest, we're pleasantly surprised with how well *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* has aged, and while it may not be the most-loved game of the series it's definitely one of the most enjoyable in its current incarnation.

SONIC 3D BLAST

Sonic 3D Blast could well be one of the greatest looking Mega Drive games ever made. The massive isometric landscapes looked simply stunning when we first saw them and they still hold up today. The new setting also meant that the gameplay was significantly different to previous *Sonic* titles and it became another game that people loved to hate.

As with *Sonic 3*, we've been playing *Sonic 3D Blast* constantly over the last few days and it's a lot better then we remember. Maybe it's the fact that it seems easier to control with the analogue stick, or that it's completely different from most of the other games on the compilation, but we just can't stop playing it.

Trundling around the vast environments looking for all the missing Flickys (birds, for those not in the know) is great fun, even if the collision detection is a bit hit and miss. An enjoyable extra that's surprisingly entertaining.





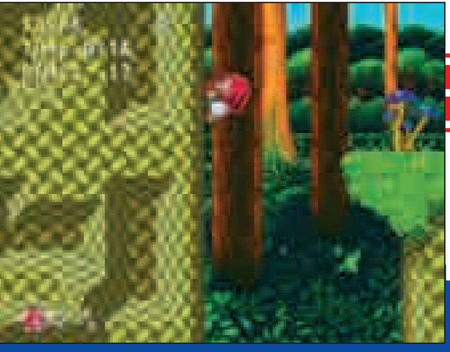
DR ROBOTNIK'S MEAN BEAN MACHINE

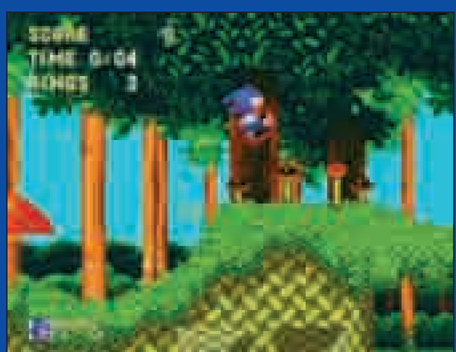
Sonic never really lent himself to puzzling, but *Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine* is one of the better examples of the genre. Essentially *Puyo Puyo* for a western audience, *Bean Machine* saw you having to group coloured beans together (four being the magic number) in order to make them disappear from your side of the playing screen. Of course, while you were attempting to clear your beans, your opponent was doing the same, resulting in frantic bean matching.

Although Sega has also included the Game Gear version on this compilation, it's the Mega Drive game that you should be spending your time with. Despite the rather basic visuals the gameplay is as addictive as ever and we've now become hooked all over again. Playing against a second player is tremendous fun and has even given *Pro Evo 4* a run for its money in the lunchtime game stakes. Definitely one of the best games on the compilation.









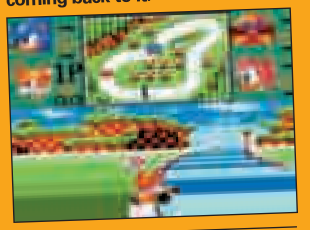


SONIC DRIFT

Sega's answer to *Super Mario Kart*, *Sonic Drift* never appeared in the UK and was only ever available on import. While it's certainly nice to see it included on the disc, a few quick plays is all it takes to confirm that it isn't actually that good.

It gives a reasonable sensation of speed, but that's about all this racer has going for it. Collision detection is very suspect and most races seem to be down to luck not skill. Taking corners is a complete nightmare and you'll constantly find yourself spinning off the track before you've mastered the sensitive controls.

It might have looked impressive on the Game Gear's small screen, but playing *Sonic Drift* on a full-sized TV shows just how bad it really is (although the same can be said for all the Game Gear titles on this compilation). Worthy of a few plays but it's unlikely that you'll be coming back to it.



▲ *Mario Kart* it ain't, but it will be of interest to Sonic completists.

SONIC & KNUCKLES

Best remembered for its unique lock-on ability that enabled you to play as Knuckles in *Sonic 2* and *3*, *Sonic & Knuckles* is deemed by many gamers to be one of the greatest Mega Drive games ever made – and it's still an incredibly deep and rewarding experience. The addition of Knuckles brought a whole new element to the gameplay and the levels developed in both depth and complexity. Visuals are terrific, with huge, superbly animated sprites and some outstanding backgrounds; the audio is just as strong and while the tunes aren't as memorable as in the earlier games, they're still of a very high standard.

Playing *Sonic & Knuckles* again allowed us to savour the fantastic controls, great design and taxing gameplay all over again. Highly recommended.

SONIC SPINBALL

Let's get one thing straight – *Sonic Spinball* isn't a patch on either *Psycho Pinball* or *Devil Crash*, okay? While it was seen by many as a stopgap while Sega was preparing to release *Sonic The Hedgehog 3*, *Sonic Spinball* is a nice addition to the compilation and still plays a reasonable game of pinball.

One thing we have discovered is that *Spinball* isn't a title that has got easier with age. Maybe we're just old hacks, but it took a surprising amount of time to get off the first stage, though at least it allowed us to realise that this isn't as good as we once thought it was. The controls seem a lot more unresponsive then we remember and the game feels just a little sluggish when placed up against the likes of the aforementioned pinball titles.

It's still an enjoyable addition and does get easier with practice, but it does feel like a space-filler.



▲ It's pinball, but involving a certain amount of jumping and spinning. *Spinball* is *such* a clever name.



"NO ALARMS AND NO SURPRISES"

Despite boasting 20 games, there's still plenty missing from Sega's new compilation. The most obvious omission is the superb *Sonic CD*, but several other Sonic titles have also been missed out, including *Sonic Drift 2, Sonic Triple Trouble, Sonic R, Sonic Jam* and *Sonic The Fighters*. Sega has already said that converting titles like *Sonic CD* to the Xbox and PS2 would be too time consuming, but considering the extra time it's had to work on this compilation, neglecting several key titles does seem like a missed opportunity.

THE FULL LINE-UP

MEGA DRIVE TITLES
- Sonic The Hedgehog
- Sonic The Hedgehog 2
- Sonic The Hedgehog 3
- Sonic & Knuckles
- Sonic 3D Blast
- Sonic Spinball
- Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine
- Sonic & Knuckles Lock-On: Sonic The Hedgehog 2
- Sonic & Knuckles Lock-On: Sonic The Hedgehog 3
- Sonic & Knuckles Lock-On: Blue Spheres
- The Ooze
- Comix Zone
- Flicky
- Ristar

GAME GEAR TITLES
- Sonic The Hedgehog
- Sonic Chaos
- Sonic Drift
- Sonic Labyrinth
- Sonic Blast
- Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine

FRIENDS OF SONIC

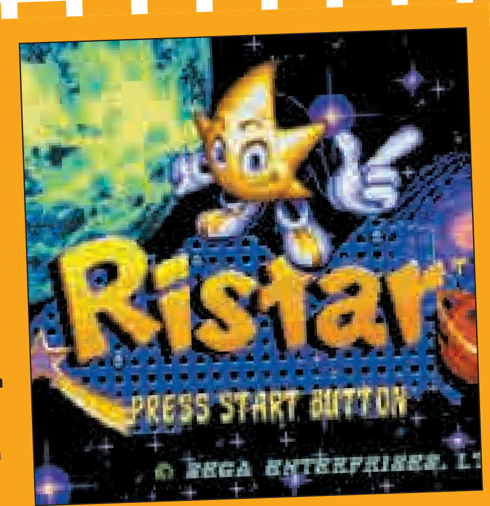
AS WELL AS FEATURING MANY OF SONIC'S MORE POPULAR OUTINGS, THIS DISC CONTAINS SEVERAL OTHER MEGA DRIVE TITLES. SOME WERE CREATED BY SONIC TEAM ITSELF, WHILE OTHERS ARE FROM SEGA DEPARTMENTS THAT HELPED OUT ON CERTAIN SONIC GAMES. THOUGH THEY DON'T CONTAIN ANY HEDGEHOGS (OR FOXES) THEY'RE A NICE ADDITION FOR COMPLETISTS AND HELP PROVIDE VARIETY AND A LITTLE EXTRA VALUE FOR MONEY

RISTAR

Although it's one of the best games on the compilation, *Ristar* isn't the easiest to access. Once you do manage to unlock it – and no, we're not going to tell you how – you'll discover an excellent platformer that still feels as fresh as the day it was first released.

Controlling the eponymous Ristar, use your exceedingly long arms to grab and headbutt enemies, get to out of reach platforms and even hang off enemies. The game still looks wonderful and is full of highly detailed locations and well-animated sprites. Ristar himself is full of character and (dare we say it) may have even given Sonic a run for his money if he'd appeared in more games.

Wonderfully slick gameplay, some challenging level design and near perfect controls make *Ristar* an absolute joy to play – what a shame that it's such a pig to unlock…

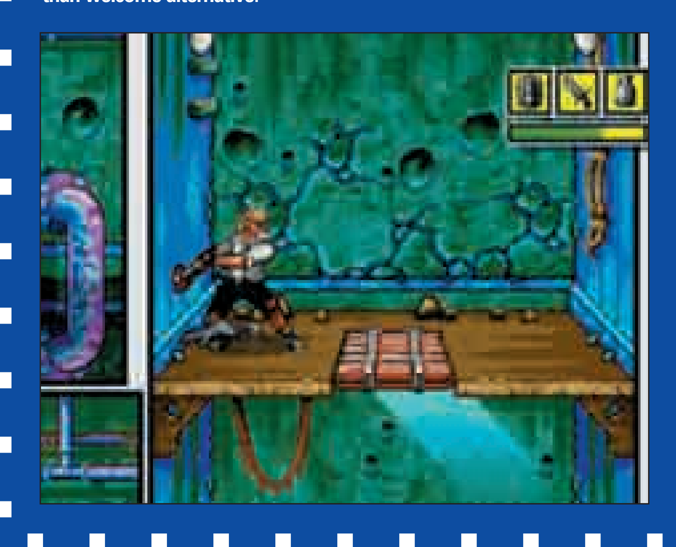


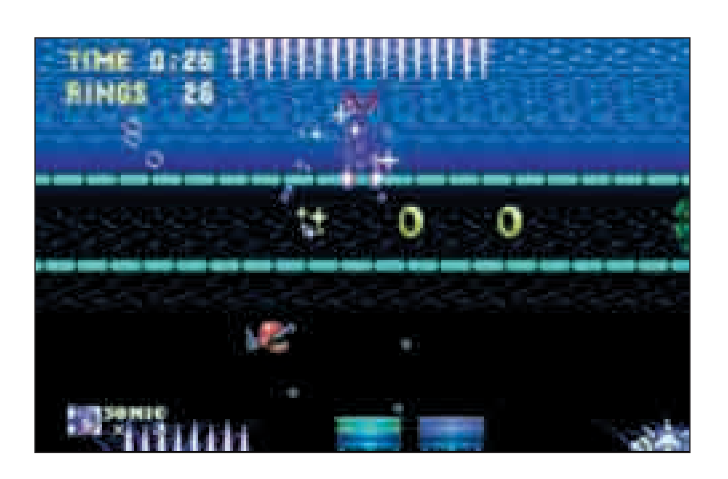
COMIX ZONE

This offering isn't the best Mega Drive title by any means, but it's certainly a lot better then most of the Game Gear games on this compilation and is reasonably easy to unlock.

Taking on the role of struggling artist Sketch Turner you find yourself trapped into your own comic after your most recent creation discovers a way to swap places with you. Essentially a side-scrolling beat-'em-up, *Comix Zone* has great visuals, intense fighting and a great line in off-the-cuff humour. Smack an opponent hard enough, for example, and he'll rip through the border of the comic-book-style screen and into the next box. Sketch has plenty of witty one-liners (some, admittedly, more witty than others) and the game plays at a cracking pace. Sadly, it's rather tough and the average gamer will need a few attempts before noticeable progress is made.

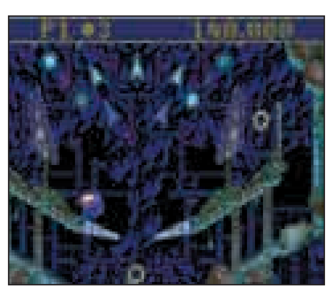
If you're bored of collecting Rings and racing at breakneck speed through different coloured zones, you'll find *Comix Zone* is a more than welcome alternative.





FINAL THOUGHTS

We're a bit torn over Sega's latest compilation. On one hand it offers some excellent games and a decent selection of bonus features to trawl through. However, most of the best titles have already appeared on the GameCube version, which is now available for only £20, and the exclusion of titles like *Sonic CD* is unforgiveable. Many of the Game Gear titles here are rather poor (in terms of graphics and gameplay), and when you look at recent compilations by the likes of Midway and Atari you can't help but wonder if Sega has priced itself out of the market.





PRECIOUS Metal

With the latest Metal Gear game on its way, what better time to look back at one of gaming's most popular franchises?

Words: John Szczepaniak

Classic Feature

IT IS PERHAPS fitting that *Metal Gear*, one of the games industry's biggest and most popular franchises, should have a history as convoluted and shrouded in half-truths as the very story that it tells.

▼ *Metal Gear*'s sequel took Snake's adventures to a whole new level.

The true birth of the series was in 1987 when Hideo Kojima was asked to make a new combat game for the MSX. Due to hardware restrictions, he chose to create one that eschewed intense action in favour of a more stealthy approach, coupled with a high-quality plot.

Metal Gear was fairly successful, with cell-based gameplay rather like the *Zelda* games, except instead of attacking mindless enemies the player had to think up different strategies for each room. As a result, it was almost puzzle-based with each 'cell' having its own obstacles. You had to take a different path through each while altering the timing of movement, and occasionally had to use special items in order to move on.



▼ *Snake's Revenge* may have been disowned by some Kojima fans, but it's an essential addition to the series.

Ardent fans of the original will attest to completing the game without ever needing the handguns or health rations provided except for during boss battles, which made for a perfectly balanced blend of stealth and occasional blasting. Even today it stands up in terms of gameplay, with a beautifully cohesive simplicity. It also showed that games can have genuinely engaging narratives involving greed, loss, deceit and betrayal.

Due to strong market forces, the Japanese MSX title was translated and brought to Europe. Although many gamers thought the game had been butchered – 40 per cent of the 155 transceiver messages were lost in order to speed up translation – it was a far superior effort than the appalling American NES localisation that would later follow.

With the growing popularity of the Famicom in Japan, Konami saw the potential for higher sales, and so mere months later *Metal Gear* was ported, though not without a few major alterations. The water-based introduction was replaced by heavy jungle (unusual, considering the game was set in South Africa), an impossible maze was added and the actual Metal Gear robot was removed completely. Such alterations to Kojima's original vision would come to be accepted as normal by the gaming masses, since the new Famicom version became the most ported game in the series, appearing on the NES, C64, PC, Amiga (unreleased) and eventually even the GameCube (to coincide with the Japanese release of *Metal Gear Solid: Twin Snakes*).

Despite modern criticisms of such changes, the core gameplay remained faithful to the original. Some veterans of the series choose





▲ The MSX boss (top) was a huge Hind helicopter, replaced by two pathetic gunmen in the NES version.

to simply regard it as a remixed version of the original – not as pure, but not without merit either. Regardless, the two games are different enough to warrant fans playing each individually, yet similar enough to be enjoyed equally.

Examination of the Japanese Famicom instruction manual shows that the storyline remained intact from the original, unlike the aberration that was to become the English-language NES version. Rather than Konami adapting the already translated European MSX manual to suit the NES version (since the Japanese MSX and Famicom manuals were nearly identical anyway) – which would have saved not only time, but the integrity of the series – Konami USA chose to re-write it. This would have been fine had it not been written by someone with little or no grasp of the game… or English.

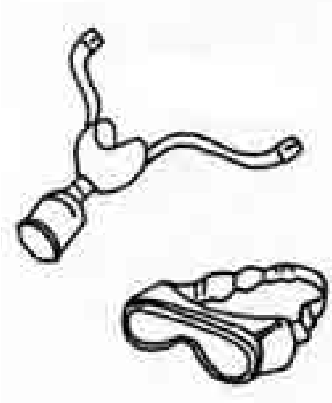
The re-written manual bore no resemblance to the MSX or Famicom versions, was poorly written, immature and made a mockery of the hard work invested in it by Kojima. It would be easy to relegate this all too common tale of poor western localisation to the annals of history, were it not for the fact that such tripe went on to spawn not only the many aforementioned ports, but also a short novel (see the 'Metal Gear Sellout' boxout, right).

Despite so much ongoing dilution, subsequent ports of the NES game remain playable and fairly accurate to the gameplay concepts that graced the first game, which can only be a testament to the great strength and refined purity of design in Kojima's original.

Second Gear

With the game's success in America it was inevitable that a sequel would follow, and so development of *Snake's Revenge* started, but from here confusion ensues as to the true nature of the titles that followed. Despite unfair and excessive western condemnation of it, Kojima himself has categorically stated that he likes *Snake's Revenge* and regards it as being faithful to the *Metal Gear* concept. Kojima tells the story of when he bumped into a colleague from a different department at Konami who was working on *Snake's Revenge* and who mentioned the project but said he knew it was not a real *Metal Gear* game. It was this encounter that motivated Kojima to create the true successor on the MSX2 (*Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake*), which was released after *Snake's Revenge*. In effect, the existence of the much-loved and highly praised official sequel – and possibly even continuation of the series from there – is thanks to *Snake's Revenge*.

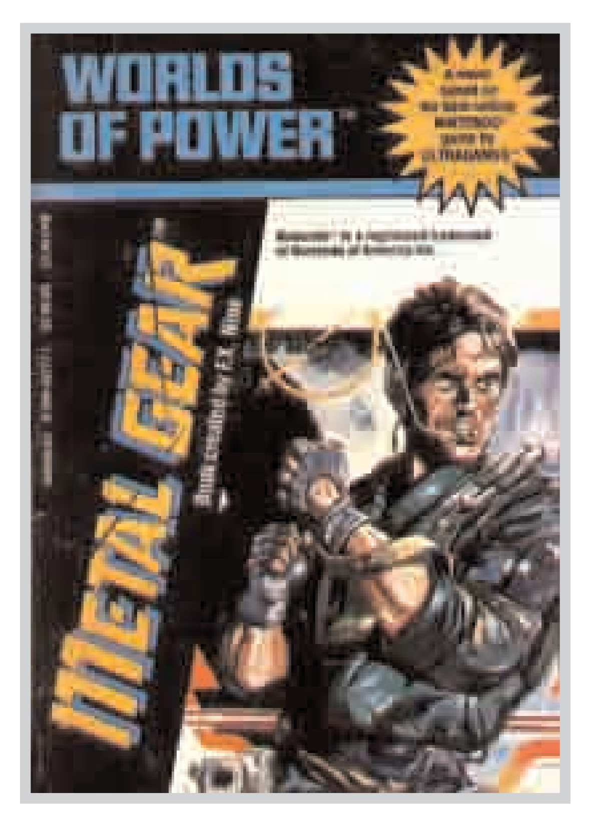
Apart from Kojima not being involved in its development, the reasons for gamers' misguided



METAL GEAR SELLOUT

SOME PEOPLE SAY METAL GEAR GAMES ARE LIKE LITERATURE. NOT IN THIS CASE…

One of the more curious *Metal Gear* spin-offs is the 1990 book *Worlds Of Power: Metal Gear*, published in the US by Scholastic. Being based exclusively on what the author read in the American manual of the NES version, the book was never going to be a work of genius. On top of that, as the book was aimed squarely at children, all question of violence or gunplay was ruled out – Justin Halley (as Snake was now known) carried plenty of guns, he just never used them. These days, the book is generally regarded as low quality (come to think of it, it must have been seen as pretty crappy 15 years ago) and is probably of interest to only the most obsessive collectors.





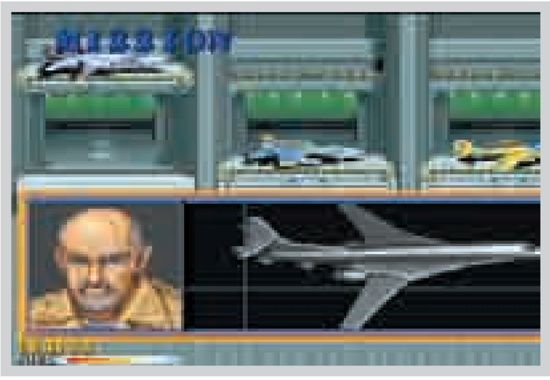
hatred of *Snake's Revenge* are threefold. First was the unnecessary addition of side-scrolling stages (included to appease action-hungry American NES gamers). Then, while the in-game story read like a *Metal Gear* game, its manual fell victim to the same silly nonsense as the previous one. Thirdly, the opening

ARTISTIC LICENCE? DON'T BE SILLY

NEED TO SELL A GAME IN A HURRY? QUICK – CALL MICHAEL BIEHN!

There's nothing worse than buying the latest film or TV tie-in game only to find that the in-game characters have very little in common with the actors who portrayed them on the big screen. This is mainly due to most of the big players having contracts in place to ensure that their images cannot be used in videogames without their express permission (although we can't see how even the inclusion of Will Smith in *Bad Boys II* would have made it a better game). Once upon a time, though, it was very different and companies like Konami and Capcom exploited this situation to the full. Is that Sean Connery giving you your instructions in *Carrier Airwing*? And why is Michael Biehn (in complete Kyle Reese get-up) on the front cover of *Metal Gear*? Easy – it didn't cost Konami a penny, was a great way to drum up interest in a game and gave you a well-known actor to associate with. If only games were like this now…





stage was incredibly difficult, meaning few players ever managed to experience the full game which was genuinely fun and in fact more faithful to Kojima's vision than the original Famicom port.

Snake's Revenge was developed for the NES but more as a sequel to the MSX original. Unlike the previous NES version it featured limited bullet range, higher guard alert levels, the ability to gain rations from stealth kills and, most importantly of all, two different models of Metal Gear to destroy. It also contained many elements that would appear in later instalments of the series, such as a combat knife, shotgun, searchlights, microphone and even a ship filled with Metal Gear models. Despite living in the shadow of Kojima's true sequel, it does have its own merits that only become apparent after extended play. By all these accounts it deserves to take its place in history alongside other *Metal Gear* games.

Gear Shift

Snake's Revenge also spawned a rare collectable which was the series' first foray into handheld gaming. In 1990 Tiger Electronics released the *Snake's Revenge* handheld LCD game as part of its Game Talk range. And this was not the last time Tiger would be connected to the *Metal Gear* universe – the official catalogue for its handheld system, game.com, listed *Metal Gear Solid* as a future release, but it never materialised. Speculation based on the few screenshots in existence says that the game would have been a watered down port of the PlayStation title.

Obscure handheld versions don't end there, though. In 2000, a fan coded a homebrew game – *Metal Gear Stealth* – for the Dreamcast's VMU. A pity, then, that the gameplay consisted of only pressing one of three directions to avoid guards. Regarding other merchandise, in Japan there is quite literally everything from novelty shot glasses and action figures to bottles of wine and entire multi-volume radio plays that build on the existing storyline.

Not too long after the release of *Snake's Revenge*, the MSX2 was graced by what many still regard as the pinnacle of the entire series: *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake*. The cult status of this one game is so phenomenal that countless websites have sprung up as shrines to one of Kojima's finest moments, showcasing everything from characters resembling actors to the apparent inspiration drawn from the military action novel *Crossfire*.

There is no mistaking the quality of this title; it contains the best elements from all other *Metal Gear* games (including even *Metal Gear Solid* on the PlayStation), in addition to exclusive content. The use of the famous Hanoi Hilton tap code, carrier pigeons, different ration varieties and hang-gliding have yet to be seen again. It also had influential characters who would later return, such as Campbell, Miller and, of course, Gray Fox, Snake's friend and arch-rival who eventually became the Ninja. Experiencing this defining game adds far greater gravitas to everything seen in later iterations, and only then can you understand why, when the Ninja dies, people are moved to tears.

Had magazines back in the day examined history, they would have been able to accurately predict perhaps over half the content of *Metal Gear Solid*, the first 3D incarnation of the series and one of the best-selling games on the PSone. It contained key events from all previous games – the watery intro and Hind D boss of the MSX original, and the spotlights of *Snake's Revenge* – and vast sections were lifted straight from *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake*; stairway chases, curing colds, shape-changing alloys and optic-camo were just some of the things Japanese gamers had experienced eight years previously. It was also not the first (or the last) time that Kojima's fantasy of entering women's toilets would be addressed.

In the end, *Metal Gear Solid* played almost like a remake of *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* albeit with an updated plot and scenario, which is no bad thing considering its incredibly high quality. Furthermore, many of the boss battles were inspired by encounters in previous games. Though the names were changed, there is no mistaking the similarity between, for example,

YEARS OF THE SNAKE

SOLID SNAKE HAS BEEN COMPLETING MISSIONS FOR NEARLY 18 YEARS – HERE'S A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF WHAT HE'S BEEN UP TO...

1987:
Metal Gear (JPN/UK) – MSX
Metal Gear (JPN) – Famicom

1988:
Metal Gear (US) – NES

1989:
Metal Gear (UK) – NES

1990:
Snake's Revenge (US) – NES
Snake's Revenge (US) – Tiger LCD Handheld
Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake (JPN) – MSX2
Metal Gear (US) – C64
Metal Gear (US) – IBM PC
Metal Gear: Worlds Of Power (US) – Short novel by Alexander Frost (Scholastic)

1991:
Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake Original Soundtrack (CD)

1992:
Snake's Revenge (UK) – NES

1998:
Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake (MSX2) – English translation patch
Metal Gear Solid demo (US) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid (JPN/US) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid Premium Package (JPN) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid Stockholder Commemoration Edition Premium Package (JPN) – PSone
MGS Drama CD Vol.1 (JPN) – Radio Play
Metal Gear Solid commemorative wine

1999:
Metal Gear Solid (EU) – PS1
Metal Gear Solid Limited Edition Premium Package (EU) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid Integral (JPN) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid: VR Missions (US/EU) – PSone
MGS Drama CD Vol.2 (JPN) – radio play

2000:
Metal Gear Solid: Konami The Best (JPN) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid Integral: Konami The Best (JPN) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid (US/EU) – PC
Metal Gear Solid (Integral) – PC
Metal Gear: Ghost Babel (JPN) – GBC
Metal Gear Solid (USA/EU) – GBC
Metal Gear Stealth (homebrew) – Dreamcast VMU

2001:
bleem! Metal Gear Solid (US/EU) – Dreamcast
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty Trial Edition (US) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty Premium Package (JPN) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty Stockholder Commemoration Edition (JPN) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty (JPN/US/EU) – PS2

2002:
Metal Gear Solid: PSone Books (JPN) – PSone
The Document of Metal Gear Solid 2 (JPN/US) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance (JPN) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance (US) – Xbox

2003:
Metal Gear Solid Integral: PSone Books (JPN) – PSone
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance (US/EU) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance (US/EU) – PC
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance: PlayStation2 The Best (JPN) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance (EU) – Xbox

2004:
Metal Gear (MSX) English translation patch
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance: Konami Dendou Collection (JPN) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes (JPN/US/EU) – GC
Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes Premium Package (JPN) – GC
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (JPN/US) – PS2
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater Premium Package (JPN) – PS2
Metal Gear (JPN) – Mobile Phone
Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake (JPN) – Mobile Phone
Metal Gear Acid (JPN) – PSP

UNRELEASED:
Metal Gear – Amiga
Metal Gear Solid – Tiger game.com

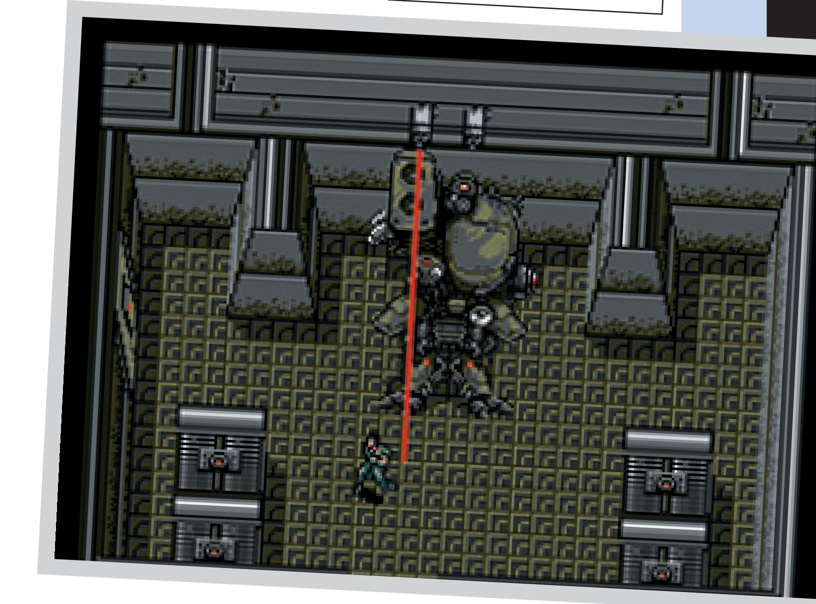
Machine Gun Kid and Vulcan Raven, in both design and the methods needed to defeat them. All of this ingrained re-use of content, found throughout the series, is not a sign of lazy design; in fact, it shows how the world inside Kojima's mind is so finely crafted and well integrated. All of his games are linked in some way: *Snatcher* has numerous *Metal Gear* references, and *Policenauts* even has an adult Meryl as a leading character.

None of Kojima's craftsmanship would be lost, since *Metal Gear Solid* was perhaps the first time that a *Metal Gear* game received not only a proper and accurate translation, but also extra features not found in the Japanese release. It also introduced gamers to VR missions that later resulted in an add-on disc featuring over a hundred extra bonus missions.

With momentum gaining, next in the production line would be the overdue appearance of Solid Snake on a Game Boy. *Ghost Babel* also lost the cell-based structure that was once the trademark of the series in favour of more expansive areas. Backtracking was also removed thanks to the implementation of progressive stages. Despite this, it is still regarded as one of the Game Boy Color's crowning moments and a worthy addition to the roster as the first true handheld *Metal Gear* title (which also included the first two-player mode in a *Metal Gear* game and extra hidden plotlines).

Which brings us full circle, since in recent months Konami has released handheld ports of both MSX games for Japanese mobile phones, complete with gameplay additions and only minor cosmetic changes. This bodes well for the future and the potential of an English port to modern handhelds, or even a compilation disc for current consoles similar to the Famicom version available on GameCube. We can but hope, since these excellent older *Metal Gear* games have been ignored for far too long.

▼ The last boss in the first *Metal Gear* game was pretty impressive. If only we still had that MSX lying around…



UNSUNG

As retro gaming gets more popular by the day it's high time that the unsung heroes who have worked so tirelessly to share their passion with others finally receive some credit. This month we catch up with Mark Rayson, who's been organising the Retrovision event for the last four years.





We all remember sitting down with our mates and playing the likes of *Mario Kart 64* and *Bomberman* into the early hours of the morning, but Mark Rayson likes to take things just a little bit further. Over the last five years the 36-year-old househusband from Oxford has been the driving force behind Retrovision, a four-day event for gamers with a love of retro gaming. Whether you're interested in the Amstrad GX400, Sinclair Spectrum or Neo-Geo AES you'll find every machine possible available and a selection of great games to play on them.

With the final Retrovision taking place this February, we thought it was a good time to track down the man who's best mates with Jeff Minter and has a thing about dressing up about Ming the Merciless… god knows why.

THE INTERVIEW

games™: So, when did you first get into gaming?

MR: Easy – *Space Invaders* on the Atari 2600 in 1980; the only thing prior to this was a Binatone *Pong* tennis machine. *Space Invaders* suddenly gave me the visuals I so desperately wanted, as well as lots of things moving about the screen, lines of Invaders dropping bombs and the ability to react by getting to fight back. It was wonderful, magical and a dream come true.

g™: What's your favourite machine and why?

MR: Commodore 64. It had great sprites, amazing SID tunes, was perfect for the time, and the first machine I ever learned to code on. Although I also have a soft spot for my Atari Falcon, which was given to me by Jeff Minter.

g™: Why did you decide to set up Retrovision?

MR: After 15 years of collecting game machines and consoles I started to wonder why I bothered. Yes, it was lovely to have it all but most of it was seldom used; fortunately, it was this chain of thought that initially gave me the idea for Retrovision. Getting in touch with my good friend Ben (who then ran the Horse and Jockey pub in Oxford), I persuaded him to let me set up all my machines in his pub's basement so that people could come in and play them like they could in the old arcades.

Once Ben was on board it was time to drum up some interest. I ran a Llamasoft archive called Camel at the Edge of Time with Justin Leask, so I immediately headed over to speak to YakYak.org – a group of Llamasofties that were not just a forum, but more a tight group of friends. I posted my idea there and everyone loved it, and a date was set.

Retrovision 1 came and went and it was a hell of a lot of fun. The Llamasofties came, Jeff Minter came, and we drank, slept in the bar, played games, drank and so on. Don't get me wrong, these gigs are not drinking events, but I insist that a bar be present at all times, it's just nicer that way.

g™: How difficult has Retrovision been to organise?

MR: It can be hell sometimes. In the early days it was a real push to

▼ By day – Mark Rayson, house-husband. By night – Ming the Merciless. And Retrovision organiser.



▼ This here is the essence of Retrovision – games, gamers and gaming in a room with some booze.



HEROES

▼ Jeff Minter's a Retrovision regular. We bet you'd never see Yuji Naka in Frome…



get the public to even notice us. In the end, though, it's been simple word of mouth that's brought us to the stage we're currently at.

g™: For those who aren't aware, what kinds of events take place at Retrovision?

MR: Retrovision 5 in February is moving on from its games-playing base and will include a shop supplied by Games Exchange, as well as the reforming of the SID80's – a band that was formed by Mark Knight, Marcel Donne, Jon Hare, Chris Abbott and, of course, Ben Daglish. Those familiar with the SID80's will hear something rather different this time as the gig will be more of an acoustic jam than rock.

Otherwise, expect amazing gameplay areas from the likes of RetroPassion, Console Passion, PsychoRobs GameZone, UKRockers and Atari.Net, and plenty of great games to play.

g™: What's the turnout like for these events?

MR: It's usually around the 150 mark, but you can never really tell and it's getting bigger every time. Retrovision 5 is the first of the Retrovisions to sell out – something that I'm really pleased about.

g™: You attract a lot of respected developers; how do the public respond to meeting them?

MR: At first most seem a little shy, but hey, have a beer or two and everything comes together. It has to be said that even the biggest coders like a good chat, especially if you're talking about their games. Jeff Minter is a real party guru and loves nothing more that spending all night chatting and playing games with everyone. He is and always has been a true ambassador for the gaming scene.

g™: What do you think about the current interest in retro gaming?

MR: It's growing but still needs to be pushed. Retro gaming at home with the likes of MAME is very big and I wouldn't be surprised if those who own old machines don't actually play them much these days because of the huge emulator scene. Retro events are definitely coming along, though. At a recent LAN party that I took Retrovision to, I was overwhelmed by the interest in my old stuff compared to their new sparkly machines.



▲ Retrovision 5 has already sold out, but this is all the retro goodness you'll be missing.

g™: Is there any reason why this is the last Retrovision?

MR: The announcement "the last ever Retrovision" at the Retrovision website (www.retrovision.org.uk) was actually a play on words. It *is* the last Retrovision, but Retrovision Fusion will be replacing it. Retrovision Fusion will be gaming and music and exhibitions – a fusion of the three to make one giant event.

The ideas behind this were first explored last year and the main part of the idea is incorporated into Retrovision 5. It's the idea of a single event based on gaming, but also an event focusing on the music of the time through bands and the computer game world, and an event where you can actually buy machines and software.

Chatting with Mark Knight and Ben Daglish has formed some great ideas that will follow through to the upcoming events in 2006 and beyond.

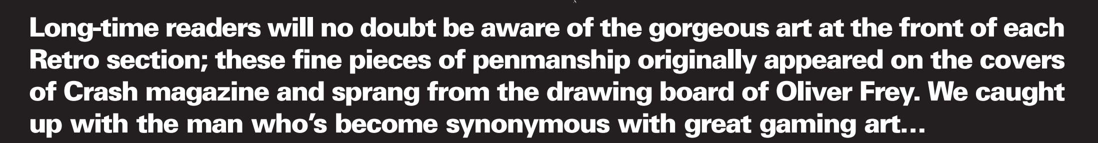
Upcoming events in 2006 and beyond will be better than ever. The gaming will grow, the music will pump and time spent within a Retrovision event will be time to be remembered, I guarantee it.



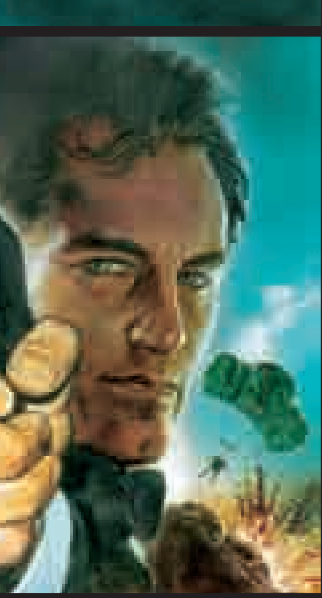


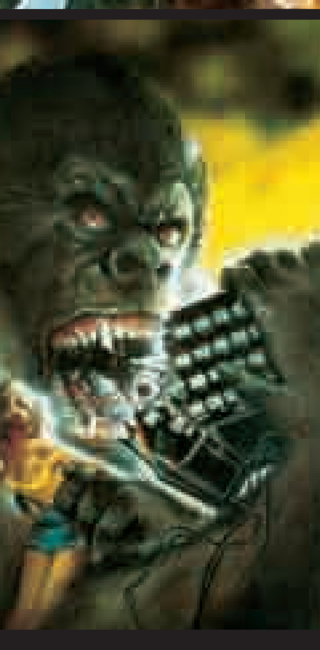


SHEER ART ATTACK



Long-time readers will no doubt be aware of the gorgeous art at the front of each Retro section; these fine pieces of penmanship originally appeared on the covers of Crash magazine and sprang from the drawing board of Oliver Frey. We caught up with the man who's become synonymous with great gaming art…





Forget all that nonsense about not judging books by their covers. When it came to *Crash* magazine, Oliver Frey's cover art was the reason many Eighties gamers picked up a copy of the Spectrum magazine. Aliens, monsters, ninjas… whatever Frey turned his hand to, it invariably looked spectacular, and his artwork is still the subject of many a fevered retro conversation today.

Now a publishing director, Frey has a distinguished (and international) past in the games industry. Born in Zurich in 1948, Frey was the eldest of three children. Although both his parents came from southern Switzerland (and thus spoke fluent Italian), living in Zurich meant the family picked up German too. When Frey Senior's job took him to England for three years, the family followed, adding to their polyglot upbringing. "Childhood was what I'd call happy and normal," recalls Frey, "albeit with a more international upbringing than my peers of the time."

It was Oliver's arrival in England in 1956 that ignited his love of drawing with his main inspiration coming from the *Eagle* comic and its classic Dan Dare strips. "I started copying the drawings, was praised at school for them, and it carried on from there," recalls Frey, who says that artistic talent runs in his family. "My great-grandfather on dad's side was a painter who ended up working in America for many years, mainly in landscapes and portraiture, before returning home and buying a house from the proceeds."

Despite his love for Dan Dare's adventures and his uncanny ability to mimic them, Frey was really inspired by the work of Frank Bellamy. "While Dan Dare was great, it was Frank Bellamy, the illustrator of the back-cover true-life stories and other series, who really inspired me," explains Frey. "His dynamic, filmic style of clear line and colour art was (and still is) some of the best produced in Britain. Don Lawrence was good too, but less skilled at figure drawing and much more painterly in style – however, I did write to him with some samples of my work when I was about 14, and he replied with an encouraging note on my future prospects."

Although he had to return to Switzerland in 1959, Frey convinced an English friend to send him copies of *Eagle*, and as he continued to lap up the adventures of his comic-book heroes, Frey realised that his calling in life was as an artist. After persuading his parents to let him take a correspondence course while at school, Frey began studying the Famous Artists Series, a collection of three huge books that was specifically aimed at commercial art.

"It started with the simplest basics and then went on to fully professional aspects of the art, including the psychological ins and outs of composition and getting the visual message across to the reader in the most impactive possible way," Frey says. "At the end of each chapter you were given a test assignment that you sent off to be judged and criticised by your teachers in Holland. The course demanded self-discipline because you were sat at home doing it with no supervision and at your own pace. I learned just about everything I know in the area of commercial art from Famous Artists, and if something like



this still existed I would recommend it to any serious aspirant to the trade of illustrator; no fancy art-school nonsense, just down-to-earth figurative and compositional skill-building."

FROM SOLDIER TO SUPERMAN

With the course passed and out of the way, Frey considered his options and, during a trip to England, approached the London Film School with aspirations of being a film director. Despite his enthusiasm ("I was keen on Bond movies, historical epics and most of all on *Lawrence Of Arabia*") he was advised to try again when he was a little older. Disappointed but unperturbed, Frey returned to Switzerland in order to begin his compulsory national service. "Army service in Switzerland is a given, so you don't think too much about it," reveals Frey. "Whatever the reservations, it's a helpful, maturing conclusion to your school years. You're thrown together with kids your age, from all walks of life, and learn how to get on together as you're drilled and ordered about – it helps get rid of much youthful egocentricity… and instils a (now unfashionable) sense of duty."

After six months of national service, Frey took a place studying English literature and history at Berne University. In Frey's own words, this decision was "a disaster"; the film-loving student lasted only one term on the course, feeling he couldn't fit in with his fellow students, so he persuaded his father to send him to the London Film School (then known as the London School of Film Technique).

As any student will know, studying – particularly in London – isn't easy, and it wasn't long before Frey was trying to find ways to support himself. "I needed to make money while at film school, and thought that the *War Picture Libraries* – small, cheaply printed black-and-white 64-page comic strip stories – might be a possibility," remembers Frey. "I sent in some samples, and the editor, EJ Bensberg, gave me my first real illustrating job. I carried on drawing them throughout the Seventies, and my money situation while studying improved radically."

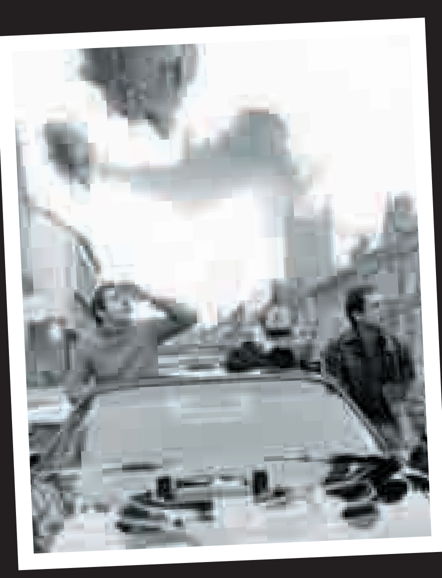
Despite a further three-month spell in National Service (where he turned down the chance to go to officer school) Frey decided that he wanted to continue with his film course and returned to England once his service had

▼ Graeme Kidd – blinged up to the nines in his mayoral robes. A far cry from the days of working on *Crash* magazine.



BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS

***Crash* may no longer be around, but its staff went on to bigger and better things. We know what happened to tips jockey Nick Roberts (he's now our managing editor), but Frey was able to shed some light on the whereabouts of other ex employees. "Graeme Kidd is Ludlow's mayor, and we still meet in the town. David Western is a friend and neighbour. Carol Kinsey (the *Crash* mail-order goddess) is now Carol Parkinson, having married *Crash*'s screen photographer Michael Parkinson, and I see both regularly. Warren Lapworth (*Zzap!64* reviewer) works with me, as does Newsfield's first employee, Matthew Uffindell. And of course I still work with Roger Kean and my brother Franco in our book company, Thalamus Publishing."**



▲ The Frey brothers and Roger Kean in the early days of Newsfield. They still work together today, though the spaceships have now gone…

ended. While he continued to illustrate for *War Picture Libraries*, Frey started work on a film script and tracked down a friend from film school, Roger Kean. The two planned to set up a film company in Switzerland but had trouble pitching their idea. Disappointed with the failed project, Frey continued his freelance work while Kean went on to become a freelance film editor (although their paths would cross at a later date when they formed Newsfield Limited).

As Frey's reputation improved so did the offers and before long he found himself drawing the very comic strips that had inspired him as a child. Although he eventually got to work on the likes of Dan Dare and the Trigan Empire, his dream work wasn't quite how he had imagined it… "Working on the strips was disappointing," laments Frey. "By the time I did a stint on Dan Dare it had gone to cheap newsprint, the stories were numbskull and the character had been changed out of recognition. Taking over from Don Lawrence on the Trigan Empire in *Look And Learn* magazine was better, but all they wanted was a replacement for Lawrence after he left for more lucrative pastures." Still, the work for such classic comic strips meant that Frey's art was reaching a greater audience than before and this created exciting new projects for the talented artist, the most important being part of the opening credits of *Superman: The Movie*.

"That was a time when I trying to get into the film technicians' union," recalls Frey. "The then head of the union pointed me towards the *Superman* production because they needed a visualiser for the flying sequences. At the interview with the art director it transpired they were having enough trouble coping with the action director's flights of fancy on this without needing to encourage him with even more exciting (in other words, expensive) visuals. However, director Richard Donner wanted to start the movie with the camera panning over a Thirties Superman comic to focus on a final frame of the *Daily Globe* building, which would dissolve to a real-life model shot. A hurried briefing from Richard in his office – which amounted to 'I need a cop patrolling the streets, pull up into overhead view of Metropolis' streets, zoom in to this building. You can do it, kid' – led to me producing the cover and two pages, which they coloured up and used in the film."

NEXT STOP, LUDLOW

Pleased with his success, but eager to push himself further, Frey's next project was the one that would make his name. In 1983, with his brother Franco and old friend Roger Kean, Frey set up Newsfield to operate Crash Micro Games Action, a mail order service based in Ludlow that sold Spectrum software. "I produced illustrations for all of our ads and the catalogue of games we sent out, while Roger Kean wrote the reviews," says Frey of his early days on *Crash*. "Then someone suggested we turn the catalogue into a proper magazine, with real reviews. We sent a copy of the catalogue to a magazine distributor, who showed it to the central buyer at WH Smith. To our surprise, the Smith's man thought it would work if it was a 'real' magazine."

It might have been a great idea in practice, but putting a magazine together wasn't the easiest of tasks, especially from a financial perspective. Kean borrowed £2,500 from Barclaycard (allegedly to pay for a new kitchen) only to find out that their distributor had gone bust by the second issue of the magazine. After receiving no money from their publisher, it appeared that *Crash*'s days as a magazine were over before they began. But, as Frey explains, fortune smiled on the team in several ways. "Our ad manager did a fabulous deal with the mighty distributor Comag. They loved *Crash* and bailed us out by collecting the first two issues' revenues and advancing us for the next six. Luck was also with us on the printing front; the printer went bust, so we didn't have to pay anything out for about eight months. That ended all our cash flow problems." Money was only one side of the story, though, and the small team soon found out that there were plenty of other problems involved with the running of a monthly magazine.

"Editorially, it was hard work," reveals Frey. "I think the first issue had around 75,000 words – a hell of a lot for the time. It was all typed on a small electric typewriter, sent as manuscript to a London typesetter and then came back a week later as galleys to be laid out. I did a lot of 'cow-gumming' along with Roger, and usually filled in the mono illustrations direct onto the layout sheets. If some look splodgy, blame it on the damned cow gum – horrible stuff!"

Aside from designing the body of the magazine, Frey was also responsible for producing *Crash*'s covers – the work for which he has become best known. However, he wasn't at leisure to spend four weeks

"IF THE ILLUSTRATIONS IN CRASH LOOKED SPLODGY THEN BLAME THE COW GUM – HORRIBLE STUFF!"



coming up with a fantastic concept. "Once editorial had made a decision on what topic or game warranted the front-page position, it was up to me to visualise it in an eye-grabbing, magazine-selling way," Frey explains. "By the time *Zzap!* and *Amtix* (our Amstrad mag) came along it meant three covers plus ancillary editorial illustrations a month; add sundry giveaway posters and you had a full work schedule. In the first year of *Crash* I also drew four colour pages of a comic strip a month: anyone remember The Terminal Man? Staffing was also a problem. The local schoolboy reviewers were plentiful, and pretty good too, but as we grew we needed more professional staff in every area, and frankly none of us was prepared for the task of management. But I think the inevitable tensions combined with the level of freedom editorial and design enjoyed created some of the best magazines of their kind."

M'LEARNED FRIENDS

As *Crash*'s success continued, so did the confidence of the team and the respect the magazine earned in the industry. After becoming increasingly irritated by *Sinclair User*'s editorial attitude towards *Crash* and its reviews, Frey and the rest of the team decided to hit back. The end result made retro history and saw *Crash* spoofing EMAP's *Sinclair User* in a four-page piece that subsequently got withdrawn from sale (issue 19 if you're planning to look for it on eBay). "Perhaps it was a part of the Newsfield charm that a good bashing session in the pub turned into a full-scale plan for the lampoon," recalls Frey. "Obviously, had we lawyers on board like any 'proper' magazine publisher the notion would have been shot down in flames before it ever hit the layout boards. But then so probably would have most of *Crash* or *Zzap!64*. I guess we all thought it a bit of a joke and that it would be taken that way by EMAP; *Sinclair User*'s editor thought so too and tried to stop his publisher taking action. The first we knew was when Roger Kean received a 'courtesy call' from *Sinclair User*'s counsel warning of the impending injunction hearing in two days' time."

Newsfield lost the case, but not in a way that EMAP had expected. *Sinclair User* wanted the spoof issue of *Crash* pulled because it was defamatory; the judge disagreed, but he did grant an injunction on the grounds that it breached copyright as the lampoon was so accurate. As copyright infringement is far harder to prove than defamation, EMAP didn't have such a cut-and-dried case – and Newsfield lived to see another day.

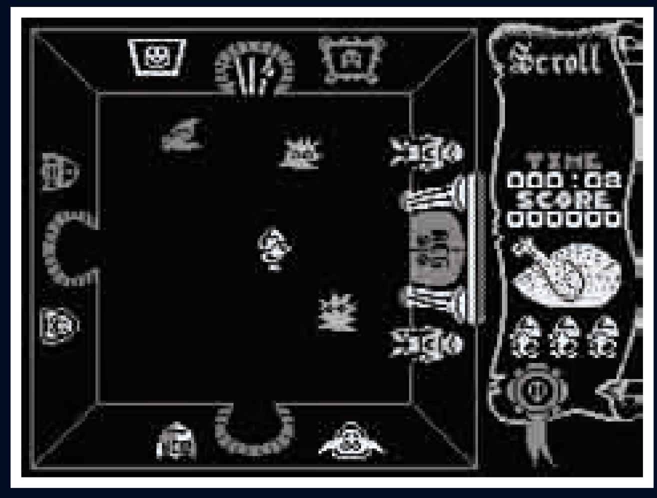
"As it happened, about 60 per cent of the copies had already gone into wholesale, the rest were recalled and the offending four pages were guillotined out, so Newsfield didn't suffer too badly financially, and later made an out of court settlement," Frey explains. "The whole affair, however, had a highly beneficial effect on *Crash* sales; we may have been 'pirates' to the London publishing community, but our readers loved us for it."

Sadly, Newsfield eventually went under in 1991, although *Crash* itself continued for another year under the Europress banner. The demise of Newsfield is worthy of its own feature and while Frey was understandably "gutted" about the closure of the company he had helped form, he was at

"IT'S NICE TO KNOW YOUR WORK IS APPRECIATED, BUT I CURL UP WHEN PEOPLE PRAISE ME TO MY FACE"

PLAY THE GAME

Despite playing such a pivotal role in the gaming press, Oli Frey never really took to playing games. When asked if he'd describe himself as a gamer (past or present), he admits that he'd have to say no, although he has played his fair share of titles. "I used to play the ones I mapped for *Crash* and *Zzap!* extensively to get the feel for them and enjoyed doing so," he says. "My main interest was in understanding the programmers' intentions, often hidden in those blobs and squiggles, in order to create a cover image that would do them proud. I did complete Ultimate's *Atic Atak* and I got quite good at playing the original *Sonic The Hedgehog*…"



▲ *Atic Atak* obviously had that special something that made Oli Frey want to play it right through to the end.

least able to take it in his stride. "You have to carry on making a living… Actually, I had booked a week in Egypt several weeks before and saw no reason to cancel it as it had already been paid for, so I was able to console myself in 35 degrees, sipping cocktails with umbrellas."

Although he's no longer creating magazine covers, Frey continues to produce impressive artwork (mostly for publications from Thalamus). The subject matter may be vastly different – the Roman army features heavily in his latest project – but the way he goes about creating his masterpieces is still the same. "I don't do any deep breathing or yoga exercises," laughs Frey, who cites artists such as Eugene Delacroix, Norman Rockwell and Frank Frazetta as personal favourites. "Once I know what I'm supposed to illustrate, I start visualising scenes in my mind. Then I start scribbling mini-compositions on the backs of envelopes (so rough that only I can make sense of them) to try to capture the dynamics I want. Then I fix on a thumbnail I like and pencil it up – unfortunate colleagues may have to pose for face and hand details (the only use I make of photo reference). One thing I always do is hold the drawing up to a mirror to see it as new, as I suffer from astigmatism and faces can become lopsided."

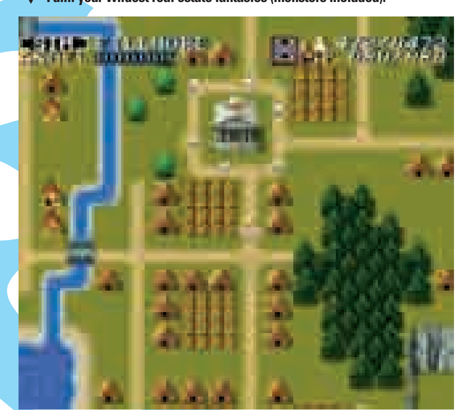
While the way he goes about creating his work remains unchanged, the same cannot be said for the tools he now uses. "I once said in an interview in *Crash* that I could never see myself using a computer for illustration. Well, that was then… In recent years virtually none of my artwork has ended up as a painting on a board; my airbrush compressor has rusted and

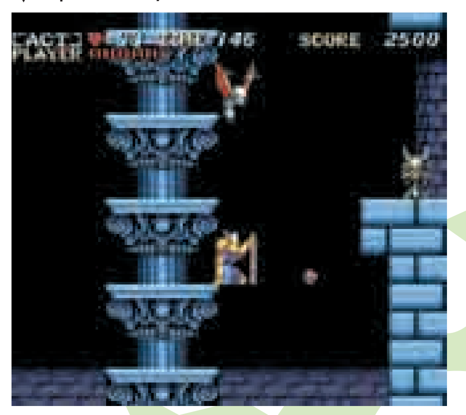
all the coloured inks have long dried up. I still draw the original on paper, either in line or halftone, but I then scan it in and colour up on computer. However, while this has suited a lot of recent work, the result seems to me to lack the fizz and verve necessary for action images — it's neat and tidy, but lacks the gutsyness I like. I recently did a series of 'carnage' battle scenes of Vikings, and no matter how hard I try to think otherwise, I know they would have been proper scenes from hell had I done them in ink and acrylic."

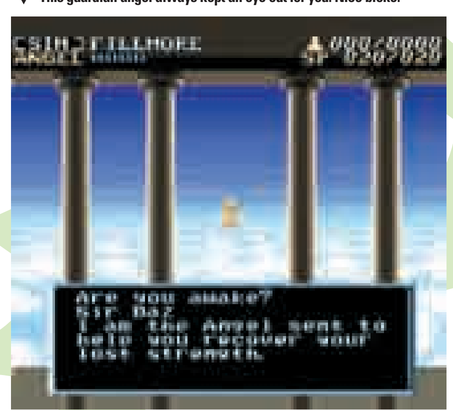
The tools may have changed, but one thing Frey still finds difficult to accept is dealing with the adulation his work has attracted. "I suppose I shouldn't, but I still get embarrassed," he admits. "Of course, that doesn't mean I'm unhappy about it – it's pleasing to know that your work is appreciated, but I do tend to curl up when people praise me to my face."

Unfortunately for Frey, the spotlight will be turned on his work when a book celebrating his creations appears in shops this year. *The Fantasy Art Of Oliver Frey* was the brainchild of Frey's business partners and is described as a "luxury colour volume" – a far cry from the now crumbling paper of those 20-year-old *Crash* magazines. And if you ask us, it's high time Frey's modern masterpieces appeared on the coffee tables of retro gamers around the world. ●




Fulfil your wildest real estate fantasies (monsters included).


Leap around like only a divine essence can to make the land safe.



This guardian angel always kept an eye out for you. Nice bloke.

Why Don't They Remake...

ACTRAISER

Slaying monsters and playing god – why hasn't this been remade yet?

Release: **1993**
Format: **SNES**
Publisher: **Enix Corporation**
Developer: **Quintet**

***ActRaiser* really shouldn't have worked.** A fusion of frantic hack-and-slash action and *Sim City*-style world building? What kind of daft idea was that? Well, a not so daft one, actually, as when *Actraiser* appeared on the SNES in 1993 (1991 in Japan) it was a revelation that's still popular today.

Taking on the role of an all-powerful deity, your task was to provide suitable homes for your followers while defending them from the landscape's many enemies. Before you started building your utopia, though, you had to ensure that the relevant area was safe, which meant seeing off any nasties. A fantastic Mode 7 sequence saw you zooming down towards the relevant hot spot and your divine essence took control of a statue before cutting a swathe of destruction through the gorgeous levels.

Reach the end of the stage and you'd face the obligatory boss; fortunately many of their attack patterns were easy to decipher, so you were soon able to get on with building your kingdom. Admittedly, the Sim side of the game was pretty linear and simple, but there was something endearing about it. As your followers learnt new skills you were able to grow crops, build bridges and create more advanced homes for your loyal subjects to live in. It was even possible for them to seal off the lairs of nearby monsters, which resulted in you being rewarded with various goodies.

These monsters constantly hassled your followers and would demolish buildings, destroy crops, carry off hapless villagers and generally make your divine life hell. Luckily, a guardian angel was always on hand to offer advice and (most importantly) defeat any nearby nasties with his bow and arrow.

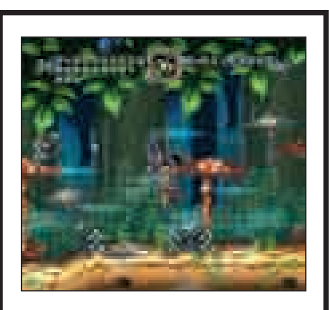
As each section of the land was cleared, your villagers would discover a second infestation of monsters once they'd established their settlement, so it was off for another side-scrolling platform section before moving on to the next, tougher area.

With great gameplay, outstanding tunes and some lovely visuals, *ActRaiser* may not be the game it once was, but it's still good fun. Although currently available for mobile phones, it's been horrifically butchered and now contains only three scrolling levels, so a remake makes great sense.

While a GBA version would be the logical choice, we reckon a DS version could work equally well. The side-scrolling sections, for example, could be enhanced by giving you weapons that could be selected by using the touch screen; you could even hit bosses with your stylus by mimicking sword strokes.

The strategy sections could be improved by letting you use the stylus to show where you'll build next. Stylus control would also make *ActRaiser*'s rather cumbersome menus much easier to negotiate.

In fact, the more we think about it, the more we want it.



SECOND TIME UNLUCKY

Obviously hoping to build on the success of the original game, a sequel appeared in Japan in 1993. Sadly, it shared little of the magic of the first *ActRaiser*.

Completely missing the Sim section that had added so much to its predecessor, *ActRaiser 2* was little more than a generic hack-and-slash arcade title; and while it looked very nice and featured more fantastic music, it was a pretty uninspired follow-up. It's worth a look by all means, but the original is still so much better even if it now looks a little dated.

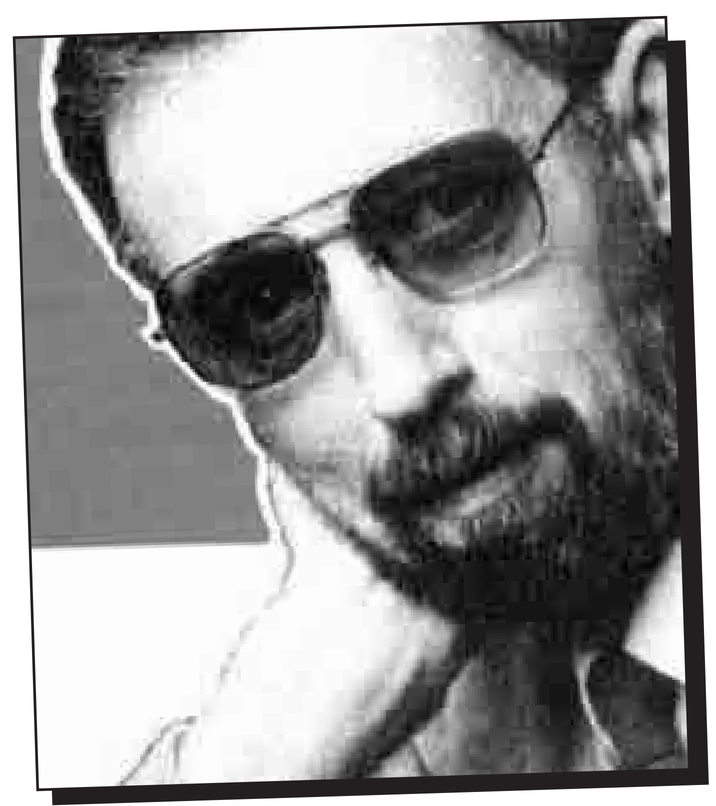


DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: SHADOW OVER MYSTARA (Arcade) Capcom, 1996 – Original Arcade Flyer

DON PRIESTLEY

Don Priestley wasn't your average bedroom programmer. A former teacher who was in his forties when he released his first game, he became well-known for his impressive Spectrum titles. We tracked him down and got him to spill the beans...

interviewed by DARRAN JONES



In a sea of colour clash, Don Priestley's games stood out like islands of loveliness. Huge sprites, challenging gameplay and quirky characters were just a few of his trademarks. Perhaps a reflection of the ingenuity of his games, Priestley's way into the industry was a little different from the usual 'teenage bedroom coder' route of the early Eighties.

Born in 1940, Priestly first got into computers in 1974 when, as a teacher, he went a course for educational technology. "It featured state-of-the-art stuff like reel-to-reel black-and-white video recorders, teaching machines (bet your readers don't know what they are) and a PDP11 computer the size of two wardrobes," he recalls. "Long before Windows came along, we used a Teletype machine and before floppy discs existed we used punched paper tape to store our precious programs."

Realising that an understanding of computers could prove beneficial for his son he enrolled with him on a local night school class where they began to learn Pascal. Although his son dropped out, Priestley stayed on. "I stuck out the course in order to finish my ultra sophisticated LIFE program," Priestley explains. "However, the course ended, LIFE was dead, so I bought a good old ZX81 to rewrite and finish the program in Sinclair Basic. I still have that ZX81 and wobbly RAM pack."

Priestley immersed himself in his new hobby, and after discovering a program called *Mugwump* in a local library, he converted it into his first commercial release, *Damsel And The Beast*. Before long Priestley had set up a freelance relationship with Bug Byte and was soon hard at work on new titles.

Though he only stayed with Bug Byte for a short period he created several successful titles, including *Mazogs* (later converted to the Spectrum and renamed *Maziacs*) and *Dictator*, which was partly inspired by his wife. "*Dictator*, which was 100 per cent Basic, came from a book my missus was reading," remembers Priestley. "It's about a dictator, funnily enough, and had jumps to different chapters depending on the reader's decision making. I never actually got around to reading the book, though…"

Moving to DK'tronics, Priestley got to work on his first big game, *Minder*, which was based on the popular TV series. Sadly, it received less than satisfactory reviews. As a refreshingly frank Priestley explains, though, there was a good reason for this: "*Minder* got crap reviews because it was a crap game," he says. "DK'tronics had to fulfil a contract to do two games based on any Thames TV programmes. When the ink was dry we found out that *Danger Mouse* was, for some reason, not available. After leaving out the news, documentaries, sport and plays the only possibilities left were *Minder* and *Benny Hill*. Less than halfway through *Minder* I knew it would be a bummer, but I just had to soldier on and 'get it out of the way'."

Setbacks weren't something to upset Priestley, though, and he bounced back with the graphically impressive *Popeye*. Featuring amazing cartoon sprites and great backdrops, *Popeye* looked incredible and remains one of Priestley's best-loved games. "I have the kind man at King Features [the game's licensor] to thank for that," laughs Priestley. "He was insistent that *Popeye* had to be the real deal – corncob pipe, tattoo on arm, weird facials, the works. When I built him he was so big I didn't quite know what to do with him. Getting the background attributes not to clash with the characters was inspiration plus 90 per cent perspiration, but once I'd got it to work I knew that I had a program 'signature' of my very own. Sure, the program was initially very slow, but with many modifications I could go on to use it for *Benny Hill*, *Trap Door I* and *II*, and *Flunky*."

Although *Popeye* proved very popular, Priestley was still tied to his original Thames contract and eventually had to work on the poorly received *Benny Hill's Madcap Chase*, another title that ended up getting rushed; "more crap, more bad feeling," is all that Priestley will say about it.

Benny Hill may have been a disappointment, but Priestley's next licence, *The Trap Door*, was a monster success and pushed his unique style into the public

PRIESTLEY LOSES HIS MEMORY

We have fond memories of *Gregory Loses His Clock* and constantly played it on the Amstrad and Spectrum. So we were more than eager to find out where the idea for this quirky little game came from. "I've absolutely no idea at all," explains an apologetic Priestley. "I can't even remember how it started or who I wrote it for. The only thing I do know is that it was a routine for getting hundreds of random but repeatable screens using the minimum of graphics." Oh well, if we can't find out from Don Priestley, it looks like we'll never know.

▲ *Gregory Loses His Clock* was simply magnificent. Don't worry, though, it looks like our hero's found it again.

consciousness. Despite the pressures of a big licence, coding was never an issue. "There was no panic at all with *The Trap Door*," Priestley recalls. "The TV series was just so easy to turn into a game. Berk was dead easy to create and the monsters could be made anyhow I chose. It's just a pity the series didn't take off – I might still be working on them now."

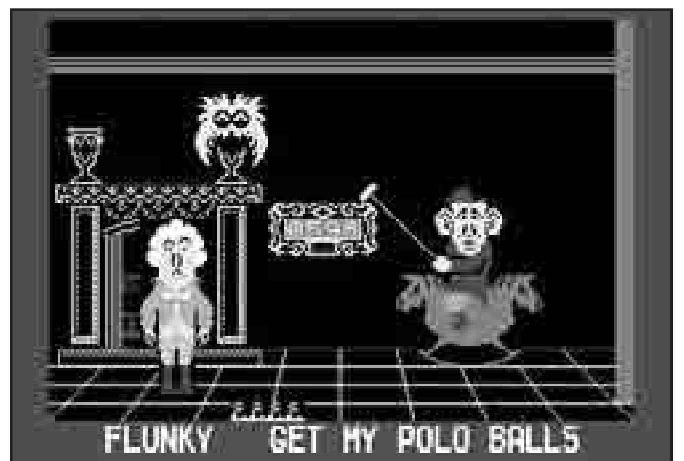
A sequel to *The Trap Door* followed and Priestley's name became synonymous with TV licences – not that it ever bothered him, although he's quick to stress he was never a one-trick pony. "There's nothing wrong with being typecast – at least the punter knows what he's getting," Priestley insists. "My most successful game commercially was *3D Tanx*, a simple shoot-'em-up, and entirely out of character for me, and I never wrote another. Perhaps I should have…"

By the late Eighties, Priestley's games were appearing on various formats, yet he had no interest in converting them himself. "A lot of 16-year-olds could do much better than me and I'd often use them to write faster, more efficient code," he says. In a similar vein, while he was more than happy to create games, Priestley rarely played them – "I just ran through them to see whether there were any smart routines I couldn't fathom out."

As the industry changed Priestley realised that it wasn't somewhere he wished to stay, and when a particularly difficult game failed to work out he decided to call it a day. "I came to the conclusion that the days of the lone programmer in his attic were becoming numbered," he recalls, with not a hint of regret. "As I'm not a team person I didn't even try to find programming employment and simply went back to teaching for a few years"

Despite being out of the industry, he takes some pleasure in the continued interest in retro gaming and is particularly delighted that gamers still hold his titles in high esteem; "those who praise my games are truly wonderful people," he maintains. Well, some of those games are truly wonderful too.

▼ *Flunky* – Royal-based collect-'em-up puzzler, or a searing indictment of the monarchist state? You decide…



SOFTOGRAPHY

Don Priestley's programming career lasted for most of the Eighties, and in that time he created some of the best looking and most difficult 8-bit puzzlers around…

Programmer

Mazogs, Bug Byte Software Ltd (ZX81) 1982
Sabotage, Macronics systems Ltd (ZX81) 1982
City Patrol, Macronics Systems Ltd (ZX81) 1982
3D Tanx, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum)........................1982
Meteoroids, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum) 1982
Dictator, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum) 1983
Jumbly, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum) 1983
Maziacs, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum)........................1983
Spawn Of Evil, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum) 1983



▼ The definitive cheeky chappy, but not a definitive game…

Benny Hill's Madcap Chase, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum) 1985
Minder, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum)..........................1985
Popeye, DK'tronics Ltd (Spectrum/Amstrad/C64) 1985
The Trap Door, Piranha (Spectrum/Amstrad/C64) 1986
Flunky, Piranha (Spectrum/C64/Amstrad) 1987
Through the Trap Door, Piranha (Spectrum/C64/Amstrad) 1987
Up For Grabs, Alternative Software Ltd (Spectrum/Amstrad) 1988
Gregory Loses His Clock, Mastertronic Plus (Spectrum/Amstrad) 1989
Target, Martech Games Ltd (Spectrum)................1989



Share your views about old-school gaming

Retro Contact

First Contact

If you're into retro gaming and you've got something to share with the world, why not write to us at: games™ Retro, Highbury Entertainment, Paragon House, St Peter's Road, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH1 2JS Or you can email: gamestm@paragon.co.uk

WORDS AND PICTURES

Dear games™

Is there any chance of a feature on Spectrum text and graphic adventures in the near future? I was a huge fan of them and fondly remember titles such as *Urban Upstart*, *The Hobbit* and *The Price Of Magik*. A feature on the people and companies behind such games – Magnetic Scrolls, Level 9 and Melbourne House – would also be an interesting read too. And let's not forget Mike Singleton's *Lords Of Midnight* and Gargoyle Games' *Dun Darach*.

Ryan Summers

Readers have been expressing quite an interest in graphic adventures, so it's something we're researching. Though we haven't decided if we'll concentrate on the games or the developers…

WORLD OF GAMES

Dear games™

Thanks for the excellent article 'Wish You Were…There?' in issue 27's Retro section. Being very interested in different cultures I found it intriguing to read about what gaming used to be like in these highly different areas.

Do you have any plans for another article similar to this one about gaming around the world today rather than way back then? Perhaps you could investigate the same countries to compare the progress of the gaming scenes. I would be interested in what you could find out.

Daniel

Glad you liked the feature. While we haven't got anything planned, a follow-up could be an interesting idea, even if it isn't strictly retro. Many of the countries we featured have undergone political or cultural shifts since the gaming era we covered (the break up of the Soviet Union, for instance) so life for gamers must have changed dramatically.

FEELING SPRITELY

Dear games™

I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed reading 'Journey To The Second Dimension' (issue 26). Although everyone raves about the superb sprite abilities of the Saturn, I think the PlayStation is just as good and your article proved this beyond a shadow of a doubt. I've actually got a fair few of the games that were mentioned – *Strider 2*, *Rapid Reload* and *Capcom Generations* to name but a few – and it's great to see that they're still being enjoyed.

Kieran Butcher



Nowt wrong with a bit of 2D, especially on the PlayStation.

With so many 3D games released for Sony's machine it's unsurprising that many of the 2D titles were ignored. But while we agree with your comments about the PlayStation being good at 2D, we still can't ever imagine playing *Radiant Silvergun* on a Sony machine…

PRICELESS OR WORTHLESS?

Dear games™

I'm responding to your PlayStation retro feature in issue 26. At 32 I've owned most gaming formats but have traded them all in gradually for the latest on the market, including my original PlayStation. However, after reading your feature I was hit by feelings of regret so strong that within a week I owned a PSone, several games I once owned, and a few hours ago I ordered *Vagrant Story* off the internet (which I haven't played, but will on your recommendation).

Getting excited about playing my old favourites has made me rethink trading in my old equipment. The ability to revisit fond memories is priceless compared to the trade-in value we get for our treasured possessions, and with hindsight I am heartbroken that I no longer have my extensive mint condition Dreamcast collection and can only hope that anybody reading this whose first gaming experiences are this generation's consoles thinks very seriously about my own experiences before parting with today's games – they are tomorrow's memories.

Paul Terry

Wise words, Paul, and it's great to hear that you've picked yourself up another PlayStation. But while we sympathise with your views on selling old consoles, for many people it's the only way they can afford new machines. Fortunately, many of the popular older machines such as the PSone are still pretty











Ooh, lovely – a DS. No, wait, our mistake,… it's a Game & Watch.

inexpensive, so a little retro dabbling shouldn't damage the overdraft.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Dear games™

While rummaging through my drawers I stumbled across my old Game & Watch. The game in question was *Squish* and you could practically see my fingerprints worn into the back due to many hours of playing.

The gameplay was rather basic and involved not getting squished (see how that works?) into the walls by metal things. But – and this was why it was as cool as *Pac-Man* that my sister owned – there was a second screen, and on that screen was the big nasty controlling Badass and it reminded me of Nintendo's DS.

I'm now looking forward to Nintendo's new console: it's a handheld, and it – woah – folds out. If anyone can make that work (and this is coming from a long-term PlayStation owner) it'll be Nintendo, as, let's face it, it's already done it before.

Rich Stewart

Good to hear you're looking forward to the DS – it's a wonderful little machine with some great games to boot. However, with the PSP due out at the same time in the UK, it will be interesting to see what Joe Public goes for. Still, if you're saving up for a DS, we're happy to buy *Squish* off you. Is £6.50 adequate?

STAR LETTER

Dear games™

I'm glad Tim Blake (issue 26) found the *Mortal Kombat* advert in issue 24 funny, and would like to point Tim and everyone else in the direction of some other classic Midway ads. Check out the history section in the recent *Midway Arcade Treasures 2* disc, as the marketing material is superb – for all the wrong reasons.

Clearly made with the intention of convincing middle-aged businessmen who ran arcades that Midway games were going to be the ones to part the kiddies willingly from their parents' cash, the promotion videos are achingly funny.

Hear the gruff WWE-style narrator whipping up the kids with his action speech, only to end every sentence with a marked change in his tone as that voice smoothes down into slimy marketing speech while he informs the arcade owner of the magic power of *Mortal Kombat* to 'fleece' money from kids and put it in their pockets. Believe me when I say this is funny (not to mention pathetic, lame and insulting to gamers). I really can't do this justice and suggest that you check it out as soon as possible, if only to hear that amazing voice.

Matt

You're right about those videos – they're absolutely hilarious. In fact, we haven't laughed so hard since Darran fell on his arse at a press party and smashed his *Boktai* GBA SP. Have a T-shirt for cheering us up.



Who else were they going to get to do the trailers for *Mortal Kombat* games? It had to be Gruff Movie Voice-Over Man™.

SHOWING ITS AGE?

Dear games™

I picked up your magazine to read the *Halo 2* review and then made my way to *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* (issue 26), only to be horrified by your comments about the original N64 classic. You state that *GoldenEye* on the N64 hasn't stood the test of time!

When it came out, it blew everything else out of the water and remained the best game ever until *Ocarina Of Time* came out. It's got great enemy AI that's still up there with the best games today and the visuals were cutting-edge for the time and are still worthy today.

GoldenEye has aged very well and still offers fun to anyone willing to blow the dust off it. In my opinion, it's the best first-person shooter ever developed and no other game has come close to giving me the feeling I got the first time I played it. Retract your statement or else!

Joe

We're sorry, but *GoldenEye* just isn't that great any more. It certainly was an amazing title when it was released, but it looks very ropey today (though this is the same for many N64 titles) and while it's still fun, even we have to admit it's been superseded by titles like *Halo 2*.



Retro Contact is sponsored by Joystick Junkies. Each month's Star Letter will win its author an item of retro gaming clothing of their choice worth up to £20.

















It might be easy to play retro games through emulation, but there's nothing quite like owning the original system – that musty smell of ancient electronics can never really be replicated with a PC. Of course, there's always a price to pay and unscrupulous dealers are out to make a quick buck, but you really don't have to pay through the nose if you look in the right places. Charity shops, car boot sales and eBay are all good places to start, but before you do, use our guide to see how much you should be paying…

3DO

Panasonic 3DO	£60
Goldstar 3DO	£50-60

ACORN COMPUTERS

BBC Micro	£50
Acorn Electron	£40

AMSTRAD

Amstrad CPC 464	£10-20
Amstrad CPC 664	£20-25
Amstrad CPC 6128	£25
Amstrad GX4000	£15-40



ATARI

Atari VCS 2600	£30 (wooden models tend to cost more)
Atari ST	£40 (with software)
Atari Lynx	£15
Atari Jaguar	£20-30

COMMODORE

Commodore Vic 20	£15-20
Commodore 64	£25-35 (varies according to model)
Commodore Amiga	£35-40 (varies according to model)
Commodore CDTV	£50-60
C64GS	£50 (becoming more sought-after)
Commodore CD32	£35



MISC

GCE Vectrex (General Consumer Electronics)	£50-250
MB Vectrex (Milton Bradley)	£175-200
JAMMA compatible cabinets	£100-350 (depending on model)
Supergun	£150-200 (varies according to model)

NEC

PC Engine	£60-90
Turbo Grafx-16	£50-60
Turbo Duo	£115-220
PC Engine GT	£80-180
Super Grafx	£200-300



NINTENDO

Game & Watch	£15-150 (depending on title)
Nintendo Entertainment System	£15-20
Game Boy/Game Boy Pocket	£10
Game Boy Color	£15
Super Nintendo	£20-40
Virtual Boy	£75-100
Nintendo 64	£20-25

SEGA

Master System	£20-30
Mega Drive	£20-25
Game Gear	£10-25
Mega CD	£40-60
Sega 32X	£30
Sega Nomad	£75-150
Saturn	£20-35 (depending on model)
Dreamcast	£20-40

SINCLAIR

Sinclair ZX-81	£40
ZX Spectrum 48K	£40-50
ZX Spectrum +	£30
ZX Spectrum 128K	£40
ZX Spectrum +2	£35
ZX Spectrum +3	£40

SNK

Neo-Geo MVS Single Slot (Arcade system)	£70 (prices for multi-slots are higher)
Neo-Geo AES (home system)	£175-225
Neo-Geo CD	£125-175
Neo-Geo CDZ	£150-175
Neo-Geo Pocket Color	£30-50

Right, you've just picked yourself up a second-hand console and are looking for some classics to play on it. The only problem is, you're not too sure what to go for – hopefully then, we can help point you in the right direction.

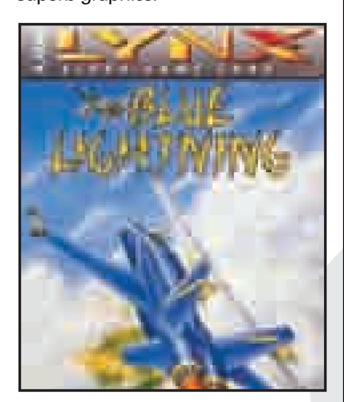
Every month we'll be printing the current prices for a range of classic games for a particular system. Of course, this is subject to change, so don't be surprised if you manage to get one for less (or, unfortunately, more). This month we're looking at Atari's Lynx.



Blue Lightning

Estimated Price: £5-25
Developer: Epyx

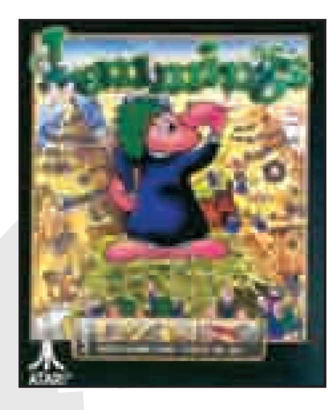
Despite being a launch title, *Blue Lightning* had some of the most impressive visuals on the Lynx and still looks good today. Easily available via the likes of eBay, *Blue Lightning* is an enjoyable shooter that offers plenty of thrills and some solid gameplay to back up its superb graphics.



Lemmings

Estimated Price: £10-99
Developer: Rare

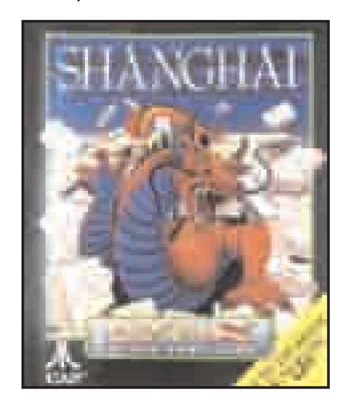
Bar titles like *Alien Vs Predator* (which were never officially released), *Lemmings* is one of the rarest titles on the Lynx and is extremely popular with collectors. While it's a highly competent conversion of the excellent puzzle game its high price means that you may want to try it out first.



Shanghai

Estimated Price: £5-10
Developer: Nintendo

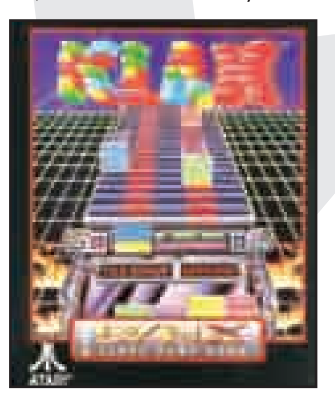
If you're planning to just kick back and relax, grab a copy of *Shanghai* and lose yourself in a wonderful puzzler. Soothing music sets you at ease and the game's gentle pace means that it's one of the most stress-free games available. A great game to play on a lazy Sunday afternoon.



Klax

Estimated Price: £3-10
Developer: Rare

What made *Klax* stand out was the amount of speech that had been crammed in. The female announcer squealed and oohed her way through the game, and the crowd applauded when you completed a level. Catching falling blocks as they fall down a ramp may not sound like fun, but it never did *Tetris* any harm.



Chip's Challenge

Estimate Price: £2-15
Developer: Epyx

Puzzle games are always popular on handhelds and *Chip's Challenge* is no exception. It may not be the best looking Lynx game ever made, but its ropey graphics can't mask the engrossing gameplay. Like *Blue Lightning*, it's extremely easy to get hold of and most of the best prices are on eBay.



Robotron 2084

Estimated Price: £5-15
Developer: ShadowSoft

Replicating the arcade's dual joysticks was never going to be easy on the Lynx, but Shadowsoft did surprisingly well considering the machine's lack of buttons. *Robotron 2084* is essentially a miniature port of the arcade classic and is the perfect solution for those looking for a frenetic blaster.



S.T.U.N. Runner

Estimated Price: £5-10
Developer: Intelligent Systems

Like *Blue Lightning*, *S.T.U.N. Runner* is another graphical tour de force for the Lynx that still gives a great impression of speed. While it was popular in arcades (no doubt because of its huge sit-on sled), it was only ever ported to the Atari ST and Lynx. This lack of home ports makes it highly collectable.



Gauntlet: The Third Encounter

Estimated Price: £5-15
Developer: Epyx

What makes the Lynx version such an interesting proposition is its characters – there are new heroes, including a Nerd, Gunfighter, Pirate and Samurai. It's looking a little rough around the edges now, but if you're a fan of the series you'll be in seventh heaven.



THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION

THIS MONTH WE MEET YET ANOTHER SEGA FAN, AS ADAM HALLIWELL SHARES HIS IMPRESSIVE DREAMCAST COLLECTION WITH US AND REVEALS THE SECRETS OF COLLECTING WHEN YOU ONLY HAVE A STUDENT BUDGET TO LIVE ON…

Q) How long have you been collecting?
I'm quite a newcomer to the retro scene and have only really started seriously building up my collection over the past four years.

Q) How did your interest in collecting start?
When the demise of the Dreamcast sadly came around, it almost felt like a mad rush to find bargains and titles that were missing from my collection in order to make it even bigger than it already was. Ever since, I've been compelled by a constant need that ensures I have a varied amount of gaming goodness to adorn my many shelves.

Q) What's your most prized possession?
It's more than likely my Sega DreamEye – a webcam that was released for the Dreamcast. Sadly, all it does at the moment is sit on my shelf and look pretty, mainly because its use in PAL territories is now fairly redundant.

Q) How much is your collection worth?
At a rough guess it would probably fetch around £1,000. Although, admittedly, that includes several recent purchases as well.

Q) What's the most highly desirable item that you haven't tracked down yet?
To be honest, there's a lot that I'd love to add to my current collection but funds just don't permit it (I am a university student after all). A cheap copy of *Border Down* and *Ikaruga* wouldn't go amiss, though, as I'm a huge fan of shooters.

Q) What sources do you use and have you ever found a real bargain?
The best places are normally forums such as rllmukforum.com, along with high-street retailer Gamestation and online shops such as play-asia.com and videogameplus.ca. The best buy I've ever found was a sub-£10 copy of *Rez* in my local Gamestation – I was very shocked indeed when I saw that, especially as it now goes for over £40. To be honest, I've picked up so many cheap items that it's hard to keep track of all of them.

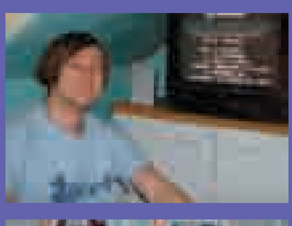
Q) What's the most money you've spent on a single item?
I don't tend to spend too much on items as trading comes heavily into play. However, I did cough up around £45 for the Limited Edition Japanese version of *De La Jet Set Radio* that featured an updated version of the game, plus a very limited edition t-shirt, in a groovy green and yellow box.

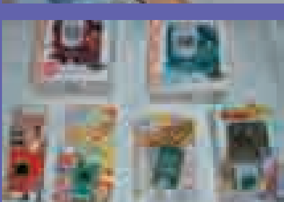
Q) What does your partner think of your collection?
Thankfully she hasn't got round to seeing it yet, so that's all to come! I'm sure she'll be fine about it though – I hope…



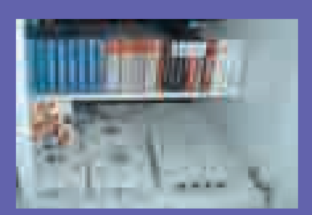


Maracas, VMUs, a mouse – it's all there.



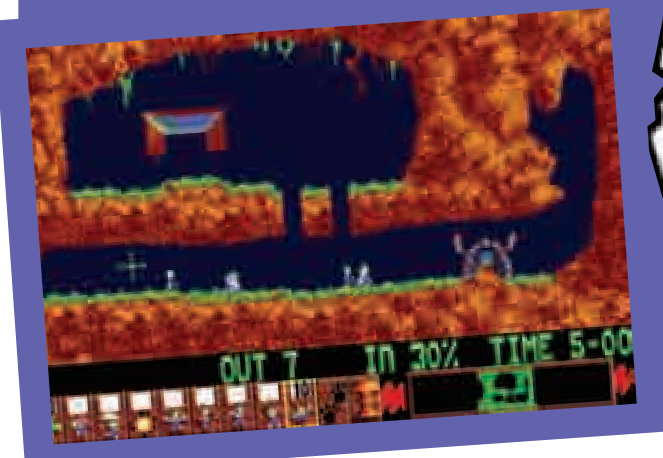


A man with *Gradius* is a happy man. Fact.





NEXT MONTH IN RETRO



As 2005 rolls on we'll be bringing you plenty of new interviews, loads more retro coverage and even more great games. We'll kick things off with a look at Lemmings – let's go!

See you then!

ON SALE 24 FEB


eMag

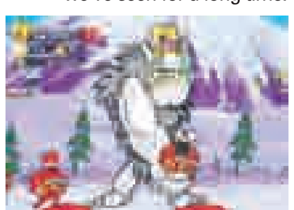
ESSENTIALS

TOO MANY GAMES, NOT ENOUGH MONEY. THANKFULLY, NOT ALL OF THEM ARE WORTH SPENDING YOUR HARD-



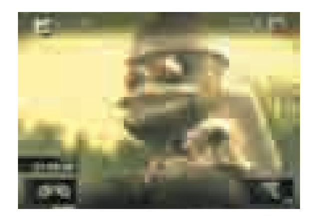
ALIEN HOMINID

Yes, it looks bizarre – but then that's half the charm. With its unique style of animation and the rock-solid difficulty that can only be borrowed from the *Metal Slug* series, *Alien Hominid* is one of the finest side-scrolling shooters we've seen for a long time.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

One part sheer madness to two parts genius, Hideo Kojima's third PlayStation outing for the *Metal Gear Solid* series walks the fine line between greatness and confusion. That said, it's well worth playing for the experience



VIEWTIFUL JOE 2

Ah, Capcom – with this red superhero you are really spoiling us. Granted, Joe's second game is no less challenging than the original (and perhaps more so in places), but that doesn't make it any less loveable… even if it does make us curse with pure rage.





PLAYSTATION2

Manufacturer Sony
UK Launch Date 24 November 2000
Media 4.75-inch DVD Disc
Current Price £104.99

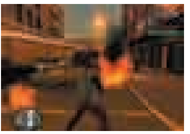
The oldest of the next-generation consoles, having had well over a year's head start over both the GameCube and Xbox. Thanks to Sony's reputation, though, it's still the most popular console around – a trend that will no doubt continue now that the remodelled, one-quarter-size PStwo is available.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE PLAYSTATION2 GAMES

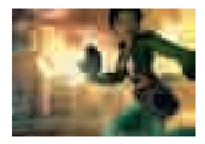
Title	Publisher	Developer	Comment
Amplitude	Sony	Harmonix	Music games have never needed as much skill as this
Beyond Good & Evil	Ubisoft	In-House	A fine example of adventuring; well worth the wait
Burnout 3: Takedown	EA Games	Criterion Studios	EA takes the arcade racing genre to new heights
Dark Chronicle	Sony	In-House	In-depth RPGs don't come much bigger than this
Devil May Cry	Capcom	In-House	The original is still the best by a long shot
Disgaea: Hour Of Darkness	Atlus	Nippon Ichi	Like your RPGs practically endless? Then this is for you
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North	Bigger, badder, better – a great *GTA* experience
Gregory Horror Show	Capcom	In-House	Bizarre, twisted and yet oh-so enjoyable
Hitman: Contracts	Eidos	Io Interactive	Silent but deadly – a real killer of a game
Ico	SCEE	In-House	Possibly the most beautiful game ever made
Katamari Damashii IMPORT	Namco	In-House	One of the quirkiest action puzzle games around
NBA Street 2	Electronic Arts	EA Sports Big	The daddy of basketball games – no contest
Prince Of Persia: Warrior Within	Ubisoft	In-House	The Prince returns again, darker than ever before
Pro Evolution Soccer 4	Konami	In-House	The only football game worth owning, period.
Rez	Sega	UGA	Deceptively simple – draws you in before you know it
Silent Hill 2	Konami	In-House	The high point of Konami's survival horror series
SSX 3	Electronic Arts	EA Sports BIG	The *Tony Hawk's* of the snowboarding world
Star Ocean: Till The End Of Time	Ubisoft	Square Enix	Square proves that there's life beyond *Final Fantasy*
Tony Hawk's Underground 2	Activision	Neversoft	Better? Again? How does Neversoft keep doing it?
Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution	Sega	In-House	By far the deepest 3D fighting game around today

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

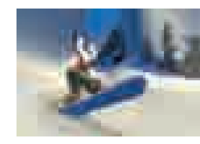
GTA: San Andreas
So big, even we haven't found everything there is to do in Rockstar's opus – it's an entire experience in itself.



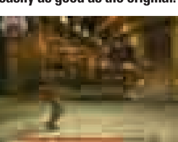
Beyond Good & Evil
Possibly the most ignored game of Christmas 2003, but one that deserves far more attention than it got.



SSX3
Snowboarding is meant to be loud, exaggerated and flashy – so who better than EA to give us all that and more besides?



POP: Warrior Within
Anyone who tells you that the Prince has 'sold out' is wrong; his latest adventure is easily as good as the original.



Devil May Cry
Dante's exploits on the PSP? Sounds like a great idea to us, especially if it matches up to the PS2 version.









EARNED CASH ON. IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE CREAM OF THE CROP, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE…



XBOX

Manufacturer Microsoft
UK Launch Date
13 March 2002
Media
4.75-inch DVD Disc
Current Price £99.99

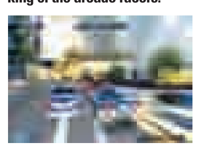
Despite a slow start, the Xbox has swiftly become one of the major players in today's console market. Suggestions that the machine is only 'a PC in a box' are founded, although the Xbox is far more accessible to gamers than most PCs. The 'special edition' Crystal console is now widely available from stores across the country.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE XBOX GAMES

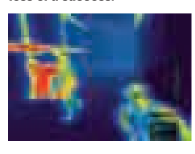
Title	Publisher	Developer	Comment
Burnout 3: Takedown	EA Games	Criterion Studios	The game that redefines the arcade racing genre
Chronicles Of Riddick: Butcher Bay	Vivendi Universal	Starbreeze Studios	A fine example of great gameplay and top-notch graphics
Def Jam: Fight For New York	Electronic Arts	Aki Corporation	Ultra-violent fighting has never looked so good
Deus Ex: Invisible War	Eidos	Ion Storm	Freestyle adventuring with a decent first-person twist
Fable	Microsoft	Big Blue Box	A special breed of RPG – well worth experiencing
Grand Theft Auto: Double Pack	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North	The best versions of *GTA III* and *Vice City*, without a doubt
Halo 2	Microsoft	Bungie	The Xbox's most popular game just got even better
Jet Set Radio Future	Sega	Smilebit	Cel-shading at its very best and a soundtrack to die for
Knights Of The Old Republic	Activision	BioWare	One of the best *Star Wars* games ever made
Ninja Gaiden	Microsoft	Tecmo	Damn tough, but a great example of style and gameplay
OutRun 2	Sega	Sumo Digital	Stunning reproduction of a great arcade game
Panzer Dragoon Orta	Sega	In-House	The classic series continues in well-presented style
Project Gotham Racing 2	Microsoft	Bizarre Creations	As comprehensive an online racer as you're ever likely to find
Project Zero	Microsoft	Tecmo	Scarier than anything else out there today
Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy	Midway	In-House	An enjoyable and solid psychic blasting romp
Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow	Ubisoft	In-House	An essential update to the hugely popular Live game
Rallisport Challenge 2	Microsoft	Digital Illusions	Does everything you'd want from a rally game and more
Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow	Ubisoft	In-House	Even better than the original, with a storming Live mode
Star Wars Battlefront	Activision	Pandemic Studios	A great game first, a great Star Wars game second
Thief: Deadly Shadows	Eidos	Ion Storm	*Splinter Cell* for the Middle Ages? Sounds good to us…

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

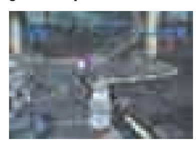
Burnout 3: Takedown
Argue whether it was really worth a ten all you want – *Burnout 3* is still the king of the arcade racers.



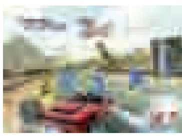
SC: Pandora Tomorrow
***Chaos Theory* is looking incredible, but that isn't to say that *Pandora Tomorrow* is any less of a success.**



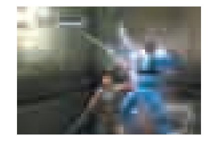
Star Wars: Battlefront
***Battlefield* with *Star Wars*? The combination couldn't be any greater. Played online, the game really comes alive.**



OutRun 2
A completely different flavour of racing to something like *Burnout 3*, but still worthy of its 'must-have' status.



Psi-Ops
Another title that appears to have done far worse than it deserves – making people's heads explode is great fun.







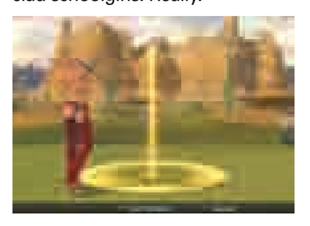
BLINX 2: MASTERS OF TIME AND SPACE

Who can't love a cat with the ability to 'sweep' time? Not us, that's for sure. Blinx's return manages to fix many of the problems of the original, as well as offering new game modes. Oh, and pigs too.



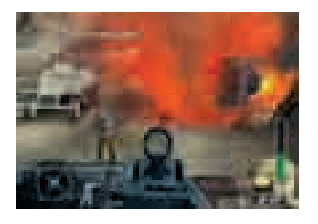
OUTLAW GOLF 2

Smut and unsavoury humour aren't things we usually go for when it comes to our videogames, but *Outlaw Golf 2* manages to offer a decent round of golf while it brings us lesbians, fat men in gimp suits and scantily clad schoolgirls. Really.



CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR

Isn't everyone bored of the whole war-based FPS thing yet? We're certainly getting that way. There are still some decent ones on the horizon, but some, like the Xbox version of *Call Of Duty*, make us wonder why we even bother.



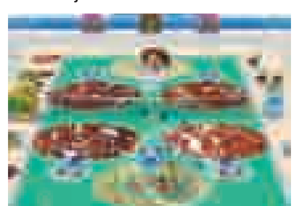
ESSENTIALS

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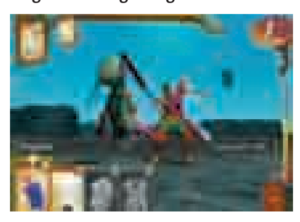
MARIO POWER TENNIS

Disappointment, thy name is *Mario Power Tennis*. While it's certainly not a bad game by any stretch of the imagination, we expected more from Camelot's move from clubs to rackets. *Mario Golf* was great fun, but this is just an exercise in tedium.



BATEN KAITOS

Extensive RPGs are clearly like buses on the GameCube – except not as red and with fewer wheels. Nevertheless, the arrival of *Baten Kaitos* marks the third Cube RPG in as many months and gives you yet another perfect reason to neglect seeing the great outdoors.



KURURIN SQUASH!

In most cases, you'd expect the straightforward adaptation of a GBA game to a bigger console to be a waste of time, but it seems that *Kururin Squash!* (along with *Wario Ware*) is the exception to the rule. Of course, we doubt it'll come out here any time soon.





GAMECUBE

Manufacturer Nintendo
UK Launch Date 3 May 2002
Media 3-inch Optical Disc
Current Price £79.99

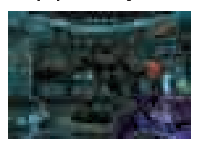
Though the GameCube seems destined to struggle, Nintendo's box of delights is still worth a look. While third-party support is dwindling, it's the first-party releases that really offer some quality gaming. Nintendo still makes some of the finest games ever, so missing out isn't really an option.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE GAMECUBE GAMES

Title	Publisher	Developer	Comment
Animal Crossing	Nintendo	In-House	The only game to keep us playing for a full year
Baten Kaitos	Nintendo	Namco	Sounds bizarre on paper, plays brilliantly in reality
Eternal Darkness	Nintendo	Silicon Knights	Scary in a different sense – very intriguing
F-Zero GX	Nintendo	Amusement Vision	Sega does it again with a brilliant retro remake
Harvest Moon: A Wonderful Life	Ubisoft	Natsume	Highly absorbing – the *Animal Crossing* of farming games
Ikaruga	Treasure	In-House	Hard as nails and incredibly addictive
Mario Golf: Toadstool Tour	Nintendo	Camelot	Golfing fun without the need for Tiger Woods
Mario Kart: Double Dash!!	Nintendo	In-House	Another great moment in gaming from Nintendo
Metroid Prime 2: Echoes	Nintendo	In-House	Another great 3D outing for our favourite female bounty hunter
Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door	Nintendo	Intelligent Systems	Hugely entertaining and challenging at the same time
Pikmin 2	Nintendo	In-House	More flowery fun for those of a patient disposition
Resident Evil	Capcom	In-House	Still as scary as it was when it first came out
Soul Calibur II	Namco	In-House	The leader of the pack when it comes to swordplay
Super Mario Sunshine	Nintendo	In-House	Not perfect, but still a very fine Mario adventure
Super Monkey Ball 2	Sega	Amusement Vision	Monkeys and balls – what more could you want?
Tales Of Symphonia	Namco	In-House	An absolute beast of an RPG that will dominate your life
Viewtiful Joe 2	Capcom	In-House	A fine return for our favourite side-scrolling superhero
Wario Ware: Mega Party Game$	Nintendo	In-House	A party game that'll have you rolling in the aisles
Zelda: Four Swords Adventures IMPORT	Nintendo	In-House	The perfect excuse to have your friends round all the time
Zelda: The Wind Waker	Nintendo	In-House	One of the many reasons to own a GameCube

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

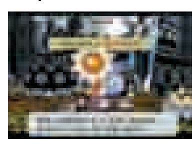
Metroid Prime 2: Echoes
Another great Samus adventure? Well, there's a turn-up. Shame the multiplayer lets things down.



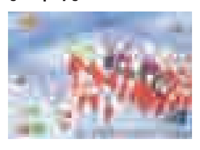
Resident Evil
The fourth instalment is on the horizon but we've still got a soft spot for the remake of the original game. Ooh, scary.



Paper Mario: TYD
Cartoon stylish but hardly a game for the kids – this is one Mario adventure that'll take you a while to unravel.



Pikmin 2
Even more green-fingered than the original game, with more than enough added gameplay goodness to boot.



Wario Ware: MPG
While *Made In Wario* takes up all our handheld time, the GameCube version keeps us busy at home.









EARNED CASH ON. IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE CREAM OF THE CROP, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE…

GBA

Manufacturer Nintendo **UK Launch Date** 22 June 2001
Media Flash Cartridge **Current Price** £69.99



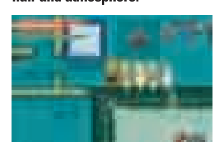
Ideal for gaming on the move, the GBA is a cheap and effective way of getting games to those who don't have time to sit down and play. The leaps in handheld technology mean that GBA games are now more accomplished and can even be compared favourably to their console-based cousins. The lovely SP model is available in a variety of colours.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE GAME BOY ADVANCE GAMES

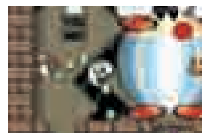
Title	Publisher	Developer
Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising	Nintendo	In-House
Astro Boy: Omega Factor IMPORT	Sega	Treasure
Boktai: The Sun Is In Your Hand	Konami	In-House
Castlevania: Aria Of Sorrow	Konami	In-House
Final Fantasy Tactics Advance	Nintendo	Square Enix
Fire Emblem	Nintendo	In-House
Golden Sun: The Lost Age	Nintendo	Camelot
Harvest Moon: Friends Of Mineral Town	Ubisoft	Natsume
Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga	Nintendo	AlphaDream
Mario Golf: Advance Tour	Nintendo	Camelot
Mario Vs Donkey Kong	Nintendo	In-House
Metroid: Zero Mission	Nintendo	In-House
Pokémon Pinball: Ruby And Sapphire	Nintendo	In-House
Pokémon Ruby / Sapphire	Nintendo	In-House
Shining Force: Resurrection Of The Dark Dragon	THQ	Sega
Street Fighter Alpha 3	Ubisoft	Crawfish
Super Mario Advance 3: Yoshi's Island	Nintendo	In-House
Wario Ware Inc: Mega Microgame$	Nintendo	In-House
Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past/Four Swords	Nintendo	In-House
Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap	Nintendo	Capcom

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

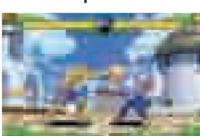
LOZ: The Minish Cap
Capcom comes up trumps with the latest Zelda adventure, offering a game with a unique flair and atmosphere.



SMA3: Yoshi's Island
Certainly one of the finest SNES Mario games, and still just as enjoyable on the GBA – plus it's really rather tough too.



Street Fighter Alpha 3
Harder to find than the shiniest of pirate treasure, but easily one of the best attempts at bringing a 2D beat-'em-up to the GBA.



PC

Manufacturer N/A **UK Launch Date** N/A
Media 4.75-inch CD/DVD Disc **Current Price** £variable



While primarily bought as a work platform, the PC has swiftly become the haven of the more 'mature' gamer. With its natural ability for online and LAN play, it's perfectly tailored for the FPS, strategy and MMORPG genres. However, it can cost a fortune to keep a PC up to date and running fast enough to support flashy graphics.

TWENTY MUST-HAVE PC GAMES

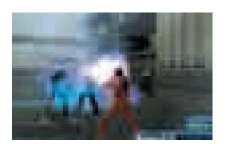
Title	Publisher	Developer
Battlefield Vietnam	EA	Digital Illusions
Call Of Duty	Activision	Infinity Ward
City Of Heroes	NCSoft	Cryptic Studios
Deus Ex	Eidos	Ion Storm
EverQuest II	Sony Online Entertainment	Ubisoft
Far Cry	Ubisoft	Crytek
Football Manager 2005	Sega	Sports Interactive
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North
Grim Fandango	LucasArts	In-House
Half-Life 2	Vivendi	Valve Software
Hidden & Dangerous 2	Gathering	Illusion
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	Novalogic	In-House
Pro Evolution Soccer 4	Konami	In-House
Rise Of Nations	Microsoft	Big Huge Games
Rome: Total War	Activision	Creative Assembly
Sam & Max Hit The Road	Activision	LucasArts
Sensible World Of Soccer	Sensible Software	Renegade
Sid Meier's Pirates!	Atari	Firaxis Games
The Sims 2	EA	Maxis
Unreal Tournament 2004	Atari	Epic Games

WHY YOU SHOULD OWN…

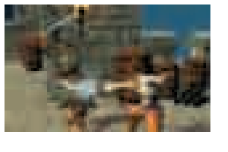
EverQuest II
As complex an MMORPG as you're ever likely to find, but one that you can also completely lose yourself in without question.



City Of Heroes
If, on the other hand, you fancy something accessible, then NCSoft's game is for you – the UK launch is next month.



Sid Meier's Pirates!
Alternatively, a life on the ocean waves can be just as enjoyable, and Sid Meier's long-awaited sequel is ideal for that.



NEXT MONTH

MORE… PREVIEWS

And so begins the slow trickle of titles in the run-up to this year's E3 – at which point, everything will explode. Probably. Before that, though, expect to see delights such as *Okami*, *Hitman: Blood Money*, *Kessen III*, *Conflict: Global Terror* and more – much, much more.

MORE… REVIEWS

Still got some leftover Christmas vouchers? Well, get them out – there's still more than a few games worth buying, even this early in the year. From *Mercenaries* and *Brothers In Arms* to *NBA Street V3*, *Ace Combat 5*, *Suikoden IV* and *Midnight Club: DUB Edition*, we'll have a whole slew of extensive reviews for you to read, digest and probably disagree with.

MORE… FEATURES

Need something a bit meatier to keep you going between news, reviews and previews? Then why not try an in-depth exploration of the world of subliminal advertising within games and the effects it has on those who play – smooth, but satisfying. Or perhaps you'd prefer something lighter, like a visit to Gearbox Software to see just how working on games like *Half-Life* and *Halo* can help you create your own great titles. Whatever your tastes, you're bound to find something you like on the games™ menu…

Please note: Due to circumstances beyond even our control, we can't guarantee that the next issue will actually contain all these things. But it will definitely have *something* in it. Probably words. And some pictures.




NEXT MONTH IN GAMES™
180
PAGES OF
UNDERPANT-SOILING
SCARINESS
Thought all the previous Resident Evil games were scary? You ain't seen nothing yet – not until the next issue, at least. games™ ventures into Capcom's new nightmare to bring you the comprehensive review of the scariest GameCube title ever…
ON SALE 24 FEB 05
ENT EVIL 4

CONTACT

ILLUMINATING THE WORLD OF games™

Enough of what we think – this is where you get to show off your rapier wit to praise, criticise or mock the games industry

Making Contact

There are many wonderful ways to get in touch with games™. The traditional postal method is perfectly acceptable using the address below:

games™, Highbury Entertainment, Paragon House, St Peter's Road, Bournemouth, BH1 2JS

However, there are quicker ways to reach us thanks to the technological marvel that is the internet. Email us at this address: **gamestm@paragon.co.uk**

Alternatively, why not get yourself on our dedicated forum?

Step One:
Get yourself online. It's fairly simple, so we're sure you'll think of something.

Step Two:
Type the following into the browser window: **www.gamestm.co.uk**
You will arrive at the **games™** website. Nice, isn't it? Click on the 'forum' icon near the top of the page. If you're a first-time visitor to the forum you'll have to register before you can post. Just click 'register', fill in a few details (such as a username and password) and you're away.

Step Three:
Ha! There is no step three. It's that simple. Just choose which thread looks most interesting then post your deepest, darkest thoughts (preferably concerning gaming) in there. There's even a dedicated letters thread where you can post anything you'd like to see on these pages.

games™ reserves the right to edit letters for space and/or clarity. The views expressed in letters on these pages are those of the correspondents and not **games™**. If you want a healthy debate, we'll see you on the forum…

WE, AS ADULT, 'hardcore' gamers, are not an elite group that owns the whole concept of fandom. We're just the lower rungs on a ladder that's going to stretch far beyond our own lifetimes, and it is going to mean vastly different things to future generations. In no time, we're going to be outmoded, retro and, frankly, distressingly uncool. The top rung, on the other hand, will always consist of children, and they will always have an uncomplicated, play-to-have-fun ideology – the same one we used to have.

Every month there's somebody moaning that Nintendo has lost the plot. No it hasn't. You've just got older and suddenly you're a bit worried that any woman you manage to lure into your bedsit would laugh at your poster of Yoshi. Why will the DS not only survive, but thrive? Because playgrounds all over the country will be full of children sending naughty pictures of teacher to each other in between multiplayer *Mario Kart*, while rich-but-lonely PSP owners scrabble to enjoy a piece of the action.

Every month, someone goes on about 'casual gamers' ruining the whole scene. No they don't, any more than a 'casual' poker player stops you from enjoying a quick hand with your mates.

As for the next person who complains that the media won't get over the fact that games aren't just for kids – no, they're not just for children, but a lot of them are and a lot more kids are playing games than aren't playing them. If it takes some big stink in the media to get parents to wise up to what their children are playing, I welcome it. Sooner or later, it will have the desired effect and parents will start checking the age ratings.

There. Every topic covered. You can cancel the letters pages now. More naked pictures of Samus, please.

Paul Fleetwood

games™: If only you'd seen fit to include a small amount of Microsoft baiting then you would have pretty much covered every topic of every letter we've ever had, meaning we could have scrapped the letters page in future and all gone home early. Still, thanks for your comprehensive views – it's a bit like a meal in pill form. As for more naked pictures of Samus, we don't remember printing any in the first place…

LETTER OF THE MONTH

I AM WRITING to complain about something that will come as no difficulty to me but could be disastrous to the DS's sales. I am concerned that left-handed people will not be able play the DS.

I noticed this while watching Shigeru Miyamoto (who is left-handed) struggling to play *Metroid Prime: Hunters*. I think this is something that Nintendo needs to sort out urgently or it could lose around 10 per cent of its sales due to lefties finding it impossible to use the device.

Pádraig Flood

games™: We have a few 'lefties' on the team and none of them have reported any trouble playing the DS. Perhaps Miyamoto is better at making games than actually playing them. Have some vouchers for your kind concern, though.



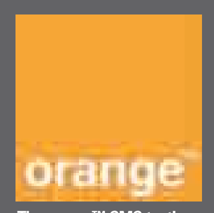
If you'd like to line your pockets with £100 of Gamestation vouchers then send us a games-related letter crammed with sparkling wit and pertinent points. Extra marks will be awarded for neat handwriting. Marks will be deducted for moaning about Nintendo.



SMS TEXT

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"I BUY **EVERY NEW 'TRIPLE-A' TITLE ON THE DAY OF RELEASE** – SOME MONTHS THAT AMOUNTS TO **HALF A DOZEN GAMES**. HOWEVER, MANY OF THESE GAMES ONLY GET PLAYED FOR A **COUPLE OF HOURS** THEN GO BACK IN THEIR BOX"



Does the DS punish lefties? We don't think so.



You want your kids playing this? You weirdo…

I WOULD LIKE to express my disappointment in your article 'Trouble in Paradise' in issue 26.

I am a Game store manager and although you raise an important point [about pre-orders being sold on before collection], I feel you have unfairly targeted my company in this article. Our store did contact all our deposit pre-order customers before release to advise them on the date of release and how long we could keep their copy – no mean feat, I can tell you.

We kept all pre-order stock and only started selling through on Sunday. In my experience 99.9 per cent of pre-orders were successful. One customer told us that our local Gamestation was taking pre-orders but that even this wouldn't guarantee them a copy on release day as they were told it would still be first come first served!

There is a certain percentage of customers who pre-order who will never purchase their game. This can be shown in my store where we still have eight *Halo 2* tins that have yet to be picked up, despite a £5 deposit for each one and it now being three weeks since release. How big do you think our stockroom is for all this extra stock? How long should we keep these for?

But I feel there is a bigger issue here: pre-orders generate stock. Therefore no pre-orders means no stock. I feel that your article may have deterred existing customers and potential customers from pre-ordering and will therefore limit the amount of stock available. The only reason that *San Andreas* sold so well was because of all the pre-orders that everyone in the industry had generated. That is why the release date was put back a week, to print more stock.

Yes, we all could have done with three, four or five times as much stock and still sold it all. Without pre-orders many people would not have been able to play the game and would have missed out. Fewer games mean fewer gamers, which means fewer copies of **games™** sold. Just look at the current stock levels of the slimline PStwo, for example.



CONTACT

ILLUMINATING THE WORLD OF games™

Enough of what we think, this is where you lot get to show off your rapier wit to praise, criticise or mock the games industry

I just hope that you can be a little more even with your criticism in the future. There was no trouble in my paradise.
Karl Beeden

games™: While your particular store may have dealt admirably with the release of *San Andreas* and *Halo 2*, others did not, and the number of complaints we've received is proof of this. As is the response from your own customer services department, which has admitted procedural faults in the cases we reported. The fact is, we reported on a genuine situation where communication between staff and customers resulted in confusion, disappointment and subsequent distrust. Whether our decision to report on this issue ultimately affects sales of the magazine, as you say it might, remains to be seen.

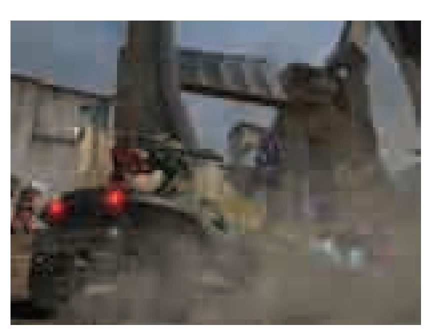
I DON'T pretend to be a hardcore gamer, I'm not even sure if I'm a casual gamer either. I don't really care – I just want to know how many people out there are in the same boat as me…

I buy every new 'triple-A' title on the day of release – some months that amounts to half a dozen games. Fair enough, I'm lucky enough to be able to afford it. However, many of these games, though excellent, get played for a couple of hours then go back in their box, mainly as I only get a couple of hours to play these days. These games then sit in their cases as new games come into the house and fight for my two hours of quality gaming time. Games such as *Fable*, *Chronicles Of Riddick*, *Knights Of The Old Republic*, *Star Wars Battlefront* and even *San Andreas* have fallen foul of my lack of spare time.

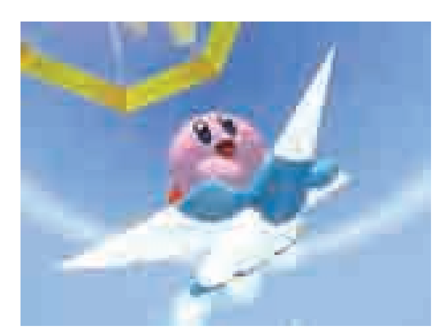
Then again, whenever possible I prefer to load up *Halo 2*, *Rainbow Six* and any other online games and go head-to-head with humans (and American kids) rather than sneak around with Sam Fisher or work my way through *Deus Ex*. All those orphaned games then go into a carrier bag and end up being traded in for more new games that I'll never play. I know it's a form of addiction, but at least it's helping the economy (if you don't count the trade-ins that is).

Am I alone? Or are there loads of you out there? Am I being disrespectful to all those people who put thousands of hours into producing these games, only for me to enjoy a tiny percentage of the total game experience. Or is it simply that I'm part of the MTV generation with a short attention span and too much spare cash?

I think I already know the answer to those questions but it's nice to get it off my chest. The first stage in beating any addiction is admitting it.
Ste Cain



Was *Halo 2* over-exposed? If magazines and publishers hadn't hyped it, would it have sold? Probably…



Some forumites don't get the deal with all the violence in games. Though others aren't so keen on Kirby…

Text Life

Sort ur bloody subscriptions service out. Its always delivered late. Sometimes very late. Its tough having 2 wait 4 something so great.
games™: We're aware that there have been a few problems with the delivery of subscription copies over the last few months, something that is completely beyond our control. However, we have been promised that the situation has now been sorted out.

Is just me or is Halo 2 on Legendary difficulty impossible. I completed Halo on Legendary, but cant get through the first level of Halo 2. So many Elites! HELP!
games™: It does seem as though Bungie has made *Halo 2* a bit more difficult than the first game, but that's not a bad thing, is it?

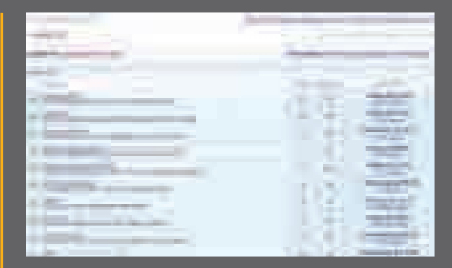
I wish I was good at PES. I have no doubt that it's a great game. But my own incompetence takes all the fun out of it. I struggle 2 get past that! Is it just me?
games™: Of course it's just you. Everyone else has either a) played all the other versions of the game or b) uses the training modes to learn all the moves and tactics, thus enabling them to play the game properly. You can't expect to be good at something without putting in the effort.

Damn, just when i thought i had control of my Zelda addiction they go and bring out minish cap. If only it wasent such a stunningly good game. Goodbye social life!
games™: Curse those developers for making such great games.

i saw a copy of your magazine on sale in new delhi india!
games™: Perhaps that's the answer for frustrated subscribers – move to India. Only eight hours away…

I just completed a rpg for the first time! fable, and it took 4th of the time it took to get to the last boss of ff7 and corrupt the data.
games™: Congratulations – we're all very proud. Have a biscuit…





FROM THE FORUM

WHEN WILL THE VIOLENCE END?

G-unit
Why is it that every popular game these days has such a reliance on violence? Look at the most anticipated games of this winter: *San Andreas, Halo 2, Half-Life 2, Metroid Prime 2* and *Prince Of Persia 2*. All of them require you to kill someone or something – why is it necessary for everything to die? Even in seemingly nice games like *Mario* or *Sonic* you still kill. When you jump on a Goomba's head you're ending its sprite-based life. Am I missing something, because last time I checked, killing someone wasn't a wholesome pastime?

Village
Erm… because the world isn't all fluffy bunnies playing in the park – the world is a dark, evil place.

CBx4
Violence sells. Simple as. Certain games are just gratuitous for that very reason. Look at *Prince Of Persia 2*. With *Sands Of Time*, Ubi had crafted an excellent platformer with the odd fight thrown in. Unfortunately, it didn't sell as well as Ubisoft hoped, so come sequel time it added a load of unnecessary blood, ironically, removing most of the charm of the original. But if it sells who cares, right? Of course it's not always gratuitous. The world is a violent place, so some will say it's done for realism. I think there's a difference between bouncing on someone's head and blowing them away with a shotgun, though (in a game sense).

el Centy
Games have always involved death because that's life. Violence sells – look at *Mortal Kombat*, it's not a patch on *Street Fighter* but the Fatalities made it just as popular. Violence, nudity, foul language… they all sell – it's sad, but that's the way it is.

G-unit
I don't know about you, but I play games as an escape; when I'm playing them I don't want to be reminded of what a shi*hole of a planet we live on, that's why I will stick to fantasy RPGs rather than war games. Come on, how can anyone find *Desert Storm: Back To Baghdad* enjoyable when that kind of thing is happening right now?

dangerboyjim
I think there's a lot of violence in games because games need to engage, and that means action. And just like the movies, action means violence. Is this a negative thing? Possibly, although it's rare that the justification for all this violence is that you just want to kill things. Even *Manhunt*'s 'plot' has an innocent guy just trying to get out of a sick game show. *Postal* and *Carmaggedon* are the only games I can think of that had violence for the sake of it. In most games you're trying to defeat evil. I like smiting evil, you like smiting evil, so let's all go and smite evil together, in the most violent way possible. Or we could play *Kirby Air Ride*…

"I'M **NOT ANTI-HALO 2** – IT'S A GREAT GAME, AFTER ALL – BUT I FEEL THAT THE **MEDIA ATTENTION AND MARKETING PUSH** HAS **SPOILED** IT FOR ME"

games™: Ah, Xbox Live addiction – it's something of a time bandit, isn't it? The problem is that the Xbox Live service is so intuitive and playing against your friends is always going to be more enjoyable than playing alone. We've also noticed an alarming tendency to shun the one-player game in favour of playing online, especially when people we know are playing online. The only way to combat this is to exercise a little self-restraint when buying and playing games by setting time aside to play through stuff offline to ensure that you get the most out of your purchases. It won't be easy, but we're sure that if you take things one day at a time you'll make a full recovery.

I'M NOT QUITE sure where to start, aside from congratulating you on the best all-round games magazine since *Arcade* disappeared some years ago. Anyway, the point of this letter is to gripe about the marketing departments of developers. While this has specific reference to *Halo 2*, there are countless games where the same applies. The issue is the hype surrounding games.

Now, I'm not anti-*Halo 2* – it's a great game, after all – but I feel that the media attention and marketing push has spoiled it for me. I went and bought it at midnight on launch day, and promptly finished the single-player game six days later. Yes, it was great while it lasted but I feel bitterly disappointed at having been led to believe that it would be the best thing since sliced *Halo*, whereas I would have given it only eight out of ten.

If one ignores that playing on Normal is only the start of things, and multiplayer is vast, the game is very similar to many other games. Hyping dual wielding as a massive advancement when *GoldenEye* on the N64 had that many years before is just one example of the publicity machine.

Furthermore, far too much about the game was given away long before release. While I understand the need to maximise sales through a vast amount of press exposure I felt that I already knew what was going to happen in the game before I even got my grubby mitts on it.

Perhaps the industry would do well to follow the example of certain developers, where small, tantalising screens are drip-fed to the public (such as with the new GameCube *Zelda*), rather than the spoiler-filled hype that was the *Halo 2* launch.

Yussry Houssen

games™: We'll admit that *Halo 2* was perhaps over-hyped, but that was largely generated by the quality of the first game and the demand for a sequel by the millions who enjoyed it. Little information of any consequence was revealed in the run-up to the game's launch; in fact, the only details that were released were focused purely on the online modes. For many, *Halo 2* was always going to be disappointing because it could never have the impact of the original game. However, if you look beyond that, *Halo 2* is still a great game that offers a terrific challenge and, along with the Xbox Live mode, should keep any gamer busy for many months to come. As for companies toning down the pre-release publicity, both methods seem to work (the all-out approach or the softly-softly way), but it seems the big games will sell on the power of their name alone.

"Magical spell is Ei-Ei-Poo!"

